

SWEET CONTENT



BY
MRS MOLESWORTH

ILLUSTRATED
BY A.S. BOYD



Heatherland
Frederick May,
7. IV. 1983
Surrey.



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‘Evey’s got something to say to you, Mrs Percy.’

SWEET CONTENT

By
Mrs MOLESWORTH

Author of
"Hoodie"
"Mermy"
"Boys and I"
"Robin Redbreast"
Etc. Etc.



Illustrated
by A.S. Boyd

W. & R. Chambers Limited
London & Edinburgh

Edinburgh:
Printed by W. & R. Chambers, Limited.
1922

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. AN 'ONLY' BABY	1
II. PAPA'S BIT OF NEWS	25
III. THE YEW TREES	47
IV. ALL MY OWN FAULT	71
V. A LARGE FAMILY	92
VI. NEW IDEAS	113
VII. A TRIO OF FRIENDS	133
VIII. FOUND WANTING	155
IX. THE STRANGE OLD WOMAN	176
X. THE LOOK ON PAPA'S FACE	201
XI. NOTHING VENTURE, NOTHING WIN	224
XII. TRUE HEARTS	248

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

	PAGE
‘Evey’s got something to say to you, Mrs Percy’.. <i>Frontispiece</i>	
And he carried me downstairs to mamma in the drawing-room	7
It was found utterly ruined by a shower of rain	15
‘Oh ! I <i>have</i> been so tired of myself, papa’	27
There were two letters for papa only	41
We were driving along Crook’s Lane	51
I was asked my opinion about them all	61
I am sure she was as sorry for me as she could be	79
Evey played the accompaniment on Mr Bickersteth’s chamber organ quite beautifully	121
All rushing about, shouting and laughing at the top of their voices	143
We were at tea in my schoolroom	157
‘Have they never taught you to show respect to age, young lady?’	183
Evey was very pleased with the monogram brooch	189
‘Yes, papa,’ I said, ‘it is all quite true’	211
‘I do hope you will forgive me’	243
They met me at the station—Evey and Mary—in their own beautiful pony-carriage	271



'SWEET CONTENT.'

CHAPTER I.

AN 'ONLY' BABY.

'SWEET CONTENT.' That was my name when I was a very tiny child. It may sound rather conceited to tell this of myself; but when I have told all the story I am now beginning, I don't *think*—at least I *hope*—you, whoever you are that read it, won't say I am conceited. Indeed, if I thought any one I knew, or rather that knew me, would be likely to read it and to know that the 'I' of it was *me*, I am not by any means sure that I would write it. But, of course, it is not at all certain that it ever will be printed or seen by any one (except, perhaps, by

my children, if, when I am grown up, I am married and have any) who ever heard of me. The world seems to me a very big place; there are such lots and lots of people in it, old ones and children, and middling ones; and they are all busy and taken up about their own affairs.

Some other children might like to read my story, just *as* a story, for I do think some parts of it are rather *extra* interesting; but it is not probable that any of them would recognise *me*, or the other 'characters' (I think that is the right word) in it. Except—except some of the other characters themselves! They don't know I am writing it—perhaps they never will know about it; but if they did—yes, even if they read every word of it—I don't think I'd mind. They are so truly— No, I mustn't begin telling about them like that; you will understand, all in good time, why least of any people in the world, perhaps, I should

mind their reading the exactly how it was of everything I have to tell. This shows how perfectly I can trust them.

And in saying even that, though I really couldn't help it, I'm afraid I have already got rather out of the proper, orderly way of telling a story.

I will start clearly now. What I have written already is a sort of preface or introduction. And it has a much better chance of being read than if I had put it separately.

As I began about my baby-name, and as I am going to use it for a title—for several reasons, as you will see—I will first explain about it.

I have been an only child ever since I can remember. But I was not always an only child. When I was a baby of a very few months old a terrible trouble came to our house: scarlet-fever broke out very badly in the little town or big village, whichever you like to call it,

where we lived then, and where we still live. And among the first deaths from it were those of my brothers and sister, the doctor's own children! Fancy—*three* dear little children all dying together—in two days at least, I think it was. No one was to blame for their catching the infection—the fever broke out so suddenly that there was no time to send them away; and though papa, as the doctor, had of course to be constantly attending the fever cases, his own children must have caught it before there could possibly have been time for him to bring it to them—even if he *could* have done so, which was doubtful, as for the two or three days before they got ill he never came into the house at all, and did not even see mamma, but ate his meals and slept in a room over the stables. I have always been glad for papa to know it could not have come through him, for even though it would have been in the

way of duty—and papa is a perfect *hero* about duty—he might have blamed himself for some carelessness or forgetfulness. And once—though they seldom speak of that awful time—mamma said something of the kind to me.

I was the baby, as I have told you—a tiny, rather delicate little thing. And, strange to say, I did not catch the fever. They did not send me away; it seemed no use after all the risks I had already run. I could almost think that poor mamma must have felt as if it would not so very much matter whether I got it or not; *my* dying then could not have made things much worse for her to bear! For, after all, a very little baby, even though it is nice and funny, and even sweet in its way, can't be anything like as interesting or as much a part of your life as talking, understanding, loving children. So it seems to me, though mamma doesn't quite agree with me. She loves

me so very much that I think she couldn't bear to think there ever was a time when I was less to her. I fancy the truth is that she does not very clearly remember what she felt during those dreadful days; I hope she does not, for even to think of them makes me shiver. They were such dear children, so bright and healthy and happy. Mamma seemed like a person in a dream or a trance, our old Prudence has often told me, after the last—Kenneth, the eldest, it was—died. Fancy the empty nurseries; fancy all the toys and books—and, worst of all, the little hats and jackets and *shoes*—lying about just as usual! For they were only ill four days—oh, I think it must have been *awful*! And yet so beautiful too.

And the little, stupid, crying baby lived, and throve, and grew well and strong. When papa, weeks after, ventured at last to look at me, he could not believe I was the same! I *hope* he felt it



And he carried me downstairs to mamma in the drawing-room.

was a little tiny bit of a reward to him for his goodness to others. To think of him going about as usual—no, not as usual, for he worked like *ten*, I have been told, to save others, though his own poor heart was breaking. And he did save many—that, too, must have been a real reward.

He kissed me gravely—Prudence told me this too; but just then I smiled, a slow-coming baby smile, I think it must have been—you know how a baby stares first before it makes up its mind to smile—and he stopped (he had been turning away) and took me in his arms.

‘My poor little darling,’ he said, ‘I feel almost afraid to love you. But no, that would be faithless.’

And he carried me downstairs to mamma in the drawing-room. I can fancy how she must have been sitting there alone, looking out on to the pretty

old-fashioned garden behind the house, and watching the spring flowers blossoming out, for it was in spring that all this happened, and thinking of *her* spring flowers. I have so often fancied it, and seen her there in her deep-black dress, in my mind that it has come to be like a real picture to me. But of course I don't know what actually happened, for Prudence wasn't there to see. Only, I *think* that from that day they took me into their hearts in a quite wonderful way, for, ever since I can remember, they have been, oh! so *very* good to me—too good, I am afraid. I fear they spoilt me. And I for long, long was not a good and grateful little daughter to them.

It is difficult to blame them for spoiling me, is it not? And perhaps there is just a *little* excuse for me in its having been so. I don't want to make excuses for myself; but, looking back, I do see that

I didn't know in the least how selfish, and self-seeking, and vain, and proud, and stuck-up, and everything horrid like that, I was. Jealous, too; but that, you see, I had no reason to find out for a long while. What a good thing it was for me that a day came when I was really tested!

I was a fat, healthy, perfectly happy baby, and I grew into a fat, healthy, perfectly happy little girl. Nothing seemed to come wrong to me. I never got ill, and by nature I think I must have had a very even, comfortable temper. I was always smiling and satisfied. Now you see how I came by my name of 'Sweet Content.' Mamma kept it for a sort of private pet-name, but it did very well with my real name, which is Constantia. And this was naturally shortened into 'Connie.' I remember papa and mamma laughing very much one day at a new servant, who must, I suppose, have

overheard my private name, and wishing to be very respectful, spoke of me as 'Miss *Content*.'

'Never let it get into "Discontent," Connie,' said papa.

'That she never will,' said mamma fondly. 'I am sure all the good fairies, and none of the spiteful ones, were at my Sweet Content's christening.'

I was quite used to hearing pretty things like that said to me or of me, and I took them as a matter of course, never doubting that I deserved them. And as no one contradicted me, and I had everything I wanted, and as I was not naturally a cross-grained or ill-tempered child, the spoiling did not show as quickly or quite in the same ways that it usually does, though I cannot help thinking that some people must have noticed it and thought me a selfish little goose. If they did, however, they were too kind to mamma, remembering her sad story, ever

to say so. Besides, mamma was gentle and sweet to everybody, and she had too much good taste and feeling to go on fussing about me before people in the way some *very* foolish parents do.

So altogether, up to the time I was ten or eleven years old, my fool's paradise was a very perfect one. I was quite satisfied that I was a model of every virtue, as well as *exceedingly* clever, and I am afraid papa and mamma thought so too. As to my looks, I have no doubt they were more than satisfied too; though, to do myself justice, I really did not trouble myself about that part of my perfections, beyond being very particular indeed about my clothes, which I never would wear if they were the least shabby or spoilt. And as I was careless and extravagant, I must have cost a good deal in this way.

'Connie has such wonderful taste for a child of her age,' I remember hearing

mamma say. 'She cannot bear anything ugly or ill-assorted colours.'

All the same, Connie had no objection to fishing for minnows in the pond with a perfectly new white muslin frock on, which was not rendered lovelier by streaks of green slime and brown mud-stains all over the sash. I don't know if I thought those 'well-assorted colours.' And though I told mamma that my everyday hat was very common-looking without ostrich feathers, I never troubled myself that my best one was left out in the garden one Sunday afternoon, so that on Monday morning it was found utterly ruined by a shower of rain that had come on in the night!

If I had had any brothers or sisters I *could* not have been so indulged, for papa was not a rich man—no country doctors ever are, I think—though he was not poor. But no more babies came, and, in her devotion to me, I hardly think



It was found utterly ruined by a shower of rain.

mamma wished for them. I remained the undisputed queen of my kingdom.

Mamma was never very strong after her three children's deaths. I was obliged to be gentle and quiet; I learnt to be so almost unconsciously, and this, I think, helped to make me seem much sweeter and better than I really was. I had almost no companions; there did not happen to be many children near my age in the neighbourhood, and even if there had been I doubt if mamma would have thought them good enough to be allowed to play with me. Though she never actually spoke against any one to me, I saw things quickly, and I know I had this feeling myself. Once or twice papa, who was too wise not to know that companionship is good for children, tried to bring about more friendship between me and our clergyman's daughters. But I did not take to them. Anna, the eldest, was 'stupid,' I said, so old for her age

(she was really three years older than I), and always 'fussing about her Sunday-school class, and helping her father, as if she was his curate.' How well I remember mamma's smiling at this clever speech! And the two little ones were 'babyish.' Then some other girls at Elmwood went to school, and even in their holiday-time I did not care to play with 'school-girls.' Besides which, poor mamma was quite dreadfully afraid of infection, and perhaps this was only to be expected.

Once during some summer holidays when we happened to be at home, for mamma and I generally went to the sea-side in July, a little cousin came to stay with us. He was two years younger than I, and the only first-cousin I had, for papa was an only child. He was mamma's nephew, and I know now that he was really a nice little boy; he is a nice big boy now, and we are great friends. But

perhaps he was rather spoilt too, though in a different way from me; and I, as I have said, was very selfish indeed. So we quarrelled terribly, and the end of it was that poor Teddy was sent home in disgrace; no one dreaming that it *could* have been 'Connie's' fault in the least.

I think, now, I have explained pretty well about myself and my home when I was very little. Nothing very particular happened till after my tenth birthday. I had scarcely a wish ungratified, and yet everybody praised me for my sweet, contented disposition! There were times when I used to wish, or to *fancy* I wished, for a sister, though if this wish had magically come true I don't believe I *would* have liked it really; and now and then papa and mamma would pity me for having no friends of my own age. But I do not think I was to be pitied for this, except that it certainly is better training for a child to have companions

of one's own standing, instead of grown-up people who can see no fault in you.

Things happen queerly sometimes! What are called 'coincidences' are not so uncommon after all. The first great change in my life happened in this way. It was in the autumn of the year in which I was ten. The weather had been dull and rainy. I had caught cold, and was not allowed to go out for some days. I was tired of the house and of myself, and though no one ever thought of saying so to me, I feel sure I was very cross. I took it into my head to begin grumbling about being lonely; grumbling, it is true, was not usually a fault of mine, and it distressed mamma very much.

'My darling, it must be that you are not at all well,' she said one dreary afternoon—afternoon just closing into evening—when she and I were sitting in the drawing-room waiting for papa to come

in. He had told mamma he might be late, so that she had had dinner early with me, and there was only some supper ready waiting for him in the dining-room, beside our tea. I always dined early of course, but when papa expected to be home pretty early and not to go out again, he and mamma dined at half-past six or seven.

'No, it isn't that at all,' I replied to mamma's anxious question. 'I'm not a bit ill. I'm quite well, and I'm sure it couldn't have hurt me to go a ride on Hop-o'-my-thumb to-day.'

Hop-o'-my-thumb was my pony. I often called him 'Hoppo' for short.

'Dearest Connie, in the rain?' said mamma.

'Well, I forgot about the rain. But to-morrow, mamma, I really must go out. It isn't for me like for most children, you know. *They* have each other to play with in the house if they have to stay

in. My only pleasure is being out-of-doors;' and I sighed deeply.

'You wouldn't like to send for Anna Gale or the twins to spend the day with you to-morrow, would you?' mamma suggested. 'I am so afraid that if this east wind continues papa won't let you go out.'

'Oh, mamma dear, how you do fuss about me!' I said. 'No, I don't care for any of the Gales. Anna doesn't know how to play; when she's not cramming at her lessons she's cleaning the store-closet or making baby-clothes for the parish babies,' I said contemptuously.

'Poor girl! I don't think she is a very lively companion,' mamma agreed. 'But then she has no mother, and her aunt is a dull sort of woman.'

It never struck me that, whether *I* cared for her or not, an afternoon among my pretty toys and books, and other luxuries, might have been a pleasant

change for Anna, even if she were rather commonplace and very overworked.

'I wish,' I remarked—'I do wish there were some nicer people at Elmwood. I wish you knew some nice companions for me, mamma.'

'So do I, darling. But you know, dearest, *how* different all would have been if'—— But here there came a break in mamma's voice, and she turned away.

I gave myself an impatient wriggle; not so that she could see it, but still it was horrid of me.

'I know what she was going to say,' I thought: "'if Eva and the others had lived.'" But they *didn't* live. I wish mamma would leave off thinking about them and think more about me who *am* alive.'

In my heart I did feel tenderly for mamma about her lost children; but I was so selfish that whatever came before *me*, even for a moment, annoyed me.

I sighed again more deeply. I have no doubt mamma thought it was out of sympathy with her. But just then there came the sound of wheels—faintly, for the drawing-room was at the back of the house, and the street at the front; up I jumped, delighted at the interruption.

'It's papa,' I said, as I ran off to welcome him.



CHAPTER II

PAPA'S BIT OF NEWS.

YES, it was papa. I opened the front-door a tiny bit just to make sure. He had already sprung out of the dog-cart, throwing the reins to the groom, who went round by a back way to the stables. As papa came close to the door he caught sight of me.

‘Connie!’ he exclaimed; ‘my child, keep out of the draught. Well, dear,’ when he had come in and was standing by me in the hall, where a bright little fire was burning—we have such a nice hall in our house, old-fashioned and square, you know, with a fireplace—‘well, dear, how are you? And what have you been doing with yourself this dull day?’

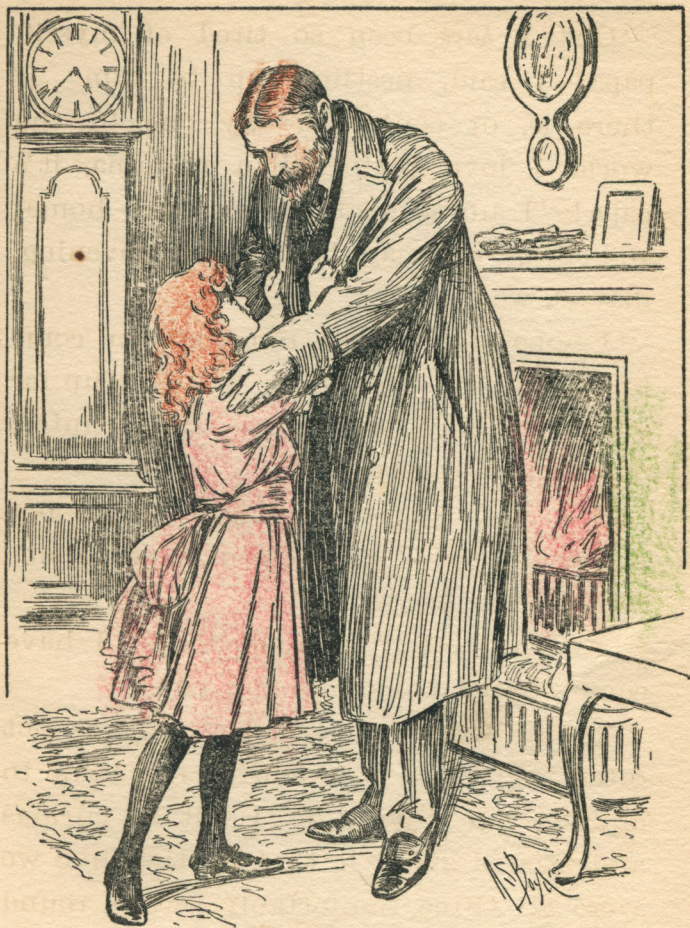
'Oh! I *have* been so tired of myself, papa,' I said, nestling up to him. If there is, or could be, any one in the world I love better than mamma, it's papa! 'I am so glad you've come home; and now we may have a nice evening, mayn't we?'

'I hope so. Mamma must let you come in at the end of dinner, to make up for your dull day,' said papa. But I interrupted him eagerly:

'It's not dinner to-night, papa—not proper dinner—because you were so uncertain, you know.'

'All the better,' he replied, 'for I have some news for mamma and you.'

News! What could it be? It was not often that news of much interest came to enliven our quiet life. I felt so curious and excited about it that by the time we were all three comfortably settled round the dining-table my cheeks were quite rosy and my eyes bright.



'Oh! I have been so tired of myself, papa.'

'Connie is looking quite herself again,' said papa. 'I don't like to hear her complain of being dull and tired.—It isn't like you, my little girl.'

'No, indeed,' mamma agreed, 'it isn't like our Sweet Content.'

'But I'm not Sweet Content at all just now,' I said. 'I've been just *boiling* for Peter to go out of the room so that papa can tell us his news.'

Mamma had not heard of it. She, too, glanced up with interest in her eyes.

'It isn't anything *very* important,' said papa. 'No one has left us a fortune, and all my patients are much the same; it is only that I think—nay, I may say I am sure—I have got a tenant for the Yew Trees.'

Mamma looked pleased.

'I am very glad indeed,' she replied. 'I am quite tired of seeing the place deserted, and it is a good deal of expense to keep

it at all tidy. I hope the offer is from some nice people.'

I had not spoken. I was very disappointed. I did not care at all whether the Yew Trees was let or not. I was far too unpractical to think anything about the money-part of it. I suppose papa saw the expression on my face, for he turned to me as he answered mamma's question.

'Yes,' he said, 'that is the best part of it. I think they are certainly very nice people.—And, Connie, there will be some companions for you among them—two girls just about your age, perhaps a little older. Their name is Whyte—a Captain Whyte and his family; he has been in the navy, but is shelved for the present. They are old friends of the Bickersteths.'

'White!' I repeated. I think I pictured it with an 'i,' not a 'y.' 'White: what a common name!'

Mamma smiled. I think my pert

speech seemed to her rather clever; but papa turned upon me almost sharply.

'Nonsense, child!' he said; 'where do you get such ridiculous notions from?'

'*Our* name is so pretty,' I replied, 'and not at all common. It is a very old name, everybody says.'

Our name is Percy; papa is Dr Percy. I don't think 'Dr' suits it as well as 'Major,' or 'Colonel,' or 'Sir.' 'Sir something Percy,' not 'Thomas,' which is papa's name, but some grander name like 'Harold' or 'Bevis' would sound lovely before 'Percy.'

Papa looked at me, and he, too, smiled a little.

'It is a pretty name if you like, my dear,' he said, 'and I am glad it pleases you. But as for our family being "old" in the usual sense, don't get any fancies into your head. My father was an honest yeoman, and *his* father was only a head-man on a farm, though thrifty and hard-

working, and, best of all, God-fearing. So that, bit by bit, he came to own land himself, and my father, following in his steps, was able to give me a first-rate education.'

I had heard this before, or some of it, but it rather suited me to ignore it. I gave my head a little toss.

'I don't see that that has anything to do with "White" being a common name,' I said.

'Perhaps not. But I don't want you to get silly fancies in your head, dear,' said papa gently. 'Trust me that Captain Whyte and his family are *not* common. It would be a pity for you to lose the chance of nice companions by any prejudice.'

'Oh, Connie would never be so foolish as that,' said mamma; 'and the Bickersteths' friends are sure to be nice people.'

Mr and Lady Honor Bickersteth, I may

as well explain, were the former rector of Elmwood and his wife. Mr Bickersteth was a very old man now, and had resigned the living some years ago in favour of Mr Gale, Anna's father, who had been his curate. Lady Honor was quite an old lady, and though she was very kind I think most of our neighbours were a little afraid of her. She was what is called 'a lady of the old school,' and had very precise ideas about how children should be brought up. I think she was the only person who ever dared to hint that I was at all spoilt. The Bickersteths still lived at Elmwood, in a pretty house a little way out of the town. They had never inhabited the Vicarage, but had let the curate have it, so when Mr Gale became vicar it made no difference in that way. And even now Mr Bickersteth still preached sometimes when he was feeling well enough.

'I am quite sure the Whytes are nice people,' papa repeated in a settled sort of way; 'and I shall be very glad for Connie to make friends with them.'

His tone was so decided that neither mamma nor I *could* have made any kind of objection. In my heart, too, I was really pleased, and not a little excited, at the idea of some new friends of my own age.

'Have they only those two children—the girls you spoke of?' asked mamma.

'Those are the only girls, but there are ever so many boys of all ages—from fifteen or sixteen down to a baby, I believe,' papa answered. 'The elder boys are to be weekly boarders at Leam; that is one reason why they have chosen Elmwood.'

Mamma raised her eyebrows a very little.

'Then they are not—not rich?' she said.

'Not at all rich,' papa replied promptly. 'I want to spare them all the expense I can. Captain Whyte is to pay a very fair rent for the Yew Trees—the same that old Mrs Nesbitt paid. I would have taken less had he pressed it, but he did not. He is very gentleman-like and liberal—it is curious how you can see the liberal spirit even when people are poor—so I want to meet him half-way. I shall have his final decision to-morrow morning, and if it is closing with the thing I should like you to drive over with me to the Yew Trees and have a look round. There are some things it is only fair we should do, and as it is your house, Rose, you have a voice in it.'

The Yew Trees had been mamma's own home as a girl. Her father had been the Elmwood doctor before papa, and this house was left to her, as she was older than her sister. Yet she had never lived

there since her parents' death; it was larger than we required, and mamma fancied it was lonely.

'I should like very much to go with you,' she replied.—'Except, Connie dear, I don't like leaving you alone.'

'Connie is much better,' said papa; 'and I think the wind is changing. I should not wonder if we have a bright, mild day to-morrow. If so, she might come too. Old Martha always has a good fire in the kitchen at the Yew Trees, and if the rest of the house is draughty she can wait for us there.'

I was very pleased at this. Strange to say, the little prejudice, though it seems exaggerated to speak of it as that, which I had so ridiculously taken up on the mention of the Whyte family, had quite melted away when I heard they were not rich. I liked the idea of being kind and generous to people less well off than ourselves; and though there was, perhaps,

a little love of patronage in this, I hope it was not *only* that.

'I should so like to go too,' I exclaimed. 'I do hope it will be a fine day. Papa, if you are going to paint and paper any of the rooms, *mayn't* I choose the paper for the little girls?'

Papa smiled. I saw he was pleased.

'How can we tell which room will be theirs?' he said.

'Oh, I *think* we can guess. They're sure to have a room together, as they're so near of an age. I dare say their papa and mamma will let them choose, and if the paper is the kind of one I mean, it would *make* them fix on the room where it is. I saw it in Fuller's shop-window the other day; roses, mamma—little climbing ones on a pale-gray ground. And the painting shall be pale gray with a pink line. It'll be lovely.'

I felt so eager about it I could scarcely sit still.

'I'm afraid that kind of paper is rather expensive,' said papa. 'And though I want to make the house neat and nice, still I can't spend very much. However, we shall see.'

'The room my sister and I had would be the nicest,' said mamma, quite entering into my plans. Dear mamma is not *very* sensible about money—she won't mind my saying so, for she says it herself. She leaves everything to papa, and a good deal *now*, I am proud to say, to me. 'You remember it, Connie? Mrs Nesbitt called it her best room. It looks out to the side with a sort of square bow-window—though that sounds very Irish!' she added, laughing.

Papa glanced at her with such pleasure. He is always so delighted when mamma laughs.

'I do hope it will go through with the Whytes,' I heard him say to himself in a low voice.

'I am so glad they are not rich,' I said with such satisfaction that papa and mamma really looked rather startled.

'Dear child'—mamma began.

I had scarcely known I was speaking aloud. I felt myself grow a little red.

'I mean,' I began confusedly, 'if they had been rich, you know, we couldn't have done anything for them, and—and—they might have been spoilt, and very likely they would have looked down on us.'

'Even though they have such a common name!' said papa mischievously. 'Eh, Connie? Try to keep your mind clear of all those prejudices, my dear. Take people as they really are, and be as good and kind to them in deed and thought, rich or poor, grand or lowly, as you *can* be, and you will find it will be all right. The real way to get on happily is to think as little of *yourself* as possible; then you will neither despise those below

you nor expect to be despised by those above you.'

I don't know that I quite understood papa then; I think I understand it better now. But that night my dreams were very pleasant; they were not about myself at all, nor even about the unknown Whytes. They were all about a lovely room with roses growing up the walls, and as they grew higher and higher the walls seemed to melt away and I found myself in a beautiful garden. But just as I was rushing forward in delight I caught sight of old Lady Honor sitting in an arbour, knitting.

'Connie Percy,' she said solemnly, in her rather peculiar voice, 'remember the true way to gather roses is first to plant them.'

Wasn't it a funny dream?

The postman's knock came, as it generally does, while we were sitting at break-



There were two letters for papa only.

fast. There were two letters for papa only. I had forgotten about Captain Whyte's answer being expected by post; my head was full of the Yew Trees and the climbing rose paper, and I was wondering if it was going to be a fine enough day for papa to say I might drive out. It was only when he looked up with a pleased exclamation that I remembered what a disappointment that letter *might* have brought.

'It is all right,' said papa. 'Captain Whyte agrees to my terms. Indeed, I almost wish,' he went on less brightly, 'that I had not named so high a rent. I'm afraid they are very—well, not at all rich, to put it mildly. He says they cannot afford to do anything to the house, and as it is quite healthy they will be satisfied if it is just clean and tidy. Strictly speaking, you see, I am not bound to do much to it; I did it up so thoroughly for Mrs Nesbitt, and

it is in perfectly good order, substantially speaking, only'—

'The papers are so ugly,' said mamma. 'You know Mrs Nesbitt chose them all, and her taste was dreadful; and there are several little things that would make it much nicer for a family of younger people. Those two poky little rooms at the back would make a nice schoolroom if thrown into one.'

'Just what Captain Whyte said himself,' papa agreed. 'Well, we must go over it, and I will see what I can afford.'

'If they are paying a good rent,' said mamma, 'that might make up a little.'

Dear mamma! she looked quite delighted with herself for being so business-like.

'Anyway,' I said, 'you really *must* let me choose a paper for the girls' room. I'd rather pay for it myself, or count it as one of my birthday presents, papa, than not have it.'

Papa laughed at us both.

'What delightful "landladies" (I suppose that's the feminine of "landlord," even in the sense of a "proprietor") you would make, you two,' he said.

But by the way he stroked my head when he went out I could tell he was pleased. I think, though he very seldom found fault with me, that papa was terribly afraid of my becoming selfish. Ah dear, I see now that I was that already!

To my great delight, papa's prophecy about the weather proved true. The wind *had* changed; it was mild and, for November, pleasant. 'If only a little bit of sun would come out,' said mamma, 'it would be perfect.'

And after luncheon—which was my dinner—the sun *did* come out, and papa came driving up just as we were beginning to be afraid he was going to be late.

'I've two hours free,' he called out cheerfully as he came in. 'I only want a scrap of luncheon, Rose; I won't be two minutes.—Run and get your hat, Connie. Wrap up well, though it is a fine day, for you've not been out lately.'



CHAPTER III.

THE YEW TREES.

WHEN I said 'a pleasant day for November,' I think I should have left out the two last words. For they rather sound as if November was rarely pleasant; and though this may be the case in some parts of England, it is certainly not so with us. Our Novembers are generally this way: there are some perfectly horrible days—rain, rain, slow and hopeless; not heavy, but so steady that you long to give a shake to the clouds and tell them to be quick about it. And then for a day or two everything and everywhere are just *sopping*; it's almost worse than the rain, for the sky still looks grim and sulky and as

if it more than half thought of beginning again. But *then* there comes sometimes a little wind, and faint gleams of sunshine sparkle out, growing steadier and fuller, and then we generally have a few days together of weather that for pleasantness can scarcely be matched. They are soft, quiet, dreamy days; the sunshine is never bright exactly, but gentle and a little melancholy. There is a queer feeling of having been naughty and being forgiven; the wind comes in little whispering sobs, like a tiny child that can't leave off crying all at once; the whole world seems tired and yet calm and hopeful in a far-off sort of way. Somehow these days make me feel much *gooder* ('better' doesn't do so well) than even the brightest and loveliest spring or summer time. They make me think more of Heaven—and they make me dreadfully sorry for all the naughty, selfish thoughts and feelings I have had.

Altogether, there is something about them I can't put in words, though once—I will come to that 'once' later on—some one said a thing that seemed to explain it almost exactly.

And this day, the day we went to the Yew Trees—it was the first time mamma and I had been there for very long—was one of those days. It was not late in November, so, though it had been raining tremendously only the day before, the clearing-up process had been got through much more expeditiously than usual, and the sun had of course rather more strength still with which to help.

'The wind has been pretty busy in the night,' said papa. 'He must have sent out all his elves to work. I scarcely remember ever seeing the roads dry up so quickly.'

'But they are rather untidy elves, all the same, papa,' I replied—I do like when papa says these funny kinds of things—

‘just look what a lot of their brushes and dusters they have left about.’

We were driving along Crook’s Lane as I spoke—the road to the Yew Trees goes that way, right through Crook’s Wood—and I pointed to lots of boughs and branches, many of them still with their leaves on, that had been blown off in the night.

‘Yes,’ said papa, laughing.

We were in the pony-carriage; at least we call it the pony-carriage, though it is much too big for Hoppo to draw, and at that time we drove a rather small horse, a cob, of papa’s in it. I did feel so happy and nice! Papa was driving, and I was beautifully wrapped up in the seat behind, which is really quite as comfortable as the front one. It seemed to me I had never scented the air so fresh and sweet before, nor heard the birds’ mild autumn chirpings so touching and tender.



We were driving along Crook's Lane.

The Yew Trees is only about a mile from us, and over the fields it is still nearer. We were soon there, and old Martha, knowing we were coming, had got the door open and the front steps cleaned. It did not look at all desolate outside, for the garden had been kept tidy in a plain sort of way. The trees which give their name to the house make a short avenue from the gate; some of them are very fine yews, I believe, though I always think them rather gloomy.

Inside, the rooms of course seemed bare and chilly. I had never thoroughly explored the house before, and I was surprised to find how large it was. Mamma, of course, knew every chink and cranny, and she took me all over while papa was speaking to a man—a builder, who had come by appointment to meet him. It was found that the partition between the two odd little rooms on the ground-

floor was a very thin one and could be taken away quite easily; and, to mamma's great pleasure, papa decided on this.

'It will make such a nice, bright school-room,' she said as we went upstairs. 'And here,' she went on, 'is the room Bessie and I used to have. Isn't it a nice room, Connie? Long ago, I remember, I used to fancy that if ever my little Evie had a sister, and we came to live here some day, I would have it beautifully done up for my own girls.'

Mamma's voice faltered a little as she said this. I was not feeling cross or impatient just then, so I answered her more gently, I am afraid, than I sometimes did when she alluded to my little dead brothers and sister.

'Well, mamma dear,' I said, 'if you do it up very prettily now it will be a great pleasure to the one little girl you still have beside you, and *also* to the two stranger little girls. I am sure, too,

that if Eva knew about it *she* would be pleased. And perhaps she does.'

'Darling! My own Sweet Content!' said mamma. She thought me *so* good for what, after all, was a great deal a fancy, though a harmless one, to please myself.

'It shall be done, Connie dearest, if I can possibly manage it,' said mamma. 'I wonder if the man downstairs has anything to do with the papering and painting.'

It turned out that he had—in little country towns you don't find separate shops for everything, you know. This was the very man in whose window I had seen the lovely rose paper. So it was settled that on our way home we should call in and look at several wall-papers. And soon after, we left the Yew Trees and drove off again.

Mr Bickersteth's house was between the Yew Trees and the town. As we

were passing the gate it opened, and Lady Honor came out. She was walking slowly, for she was not strong now, and she was an old lady—in my eyes *very* old, for I could not remember her anything else. Papa drew up when he saw her, and jumped down.

‘We have just been at the Yew Trees,’ he said. ‘My wife and Connie are so interested in getting it made nice for your friends.’

‘Ah yes!’ said Lady Honor, looking pleased, ‘we heard from Frank Whyte this morning that it is settled. Very good of you to go yourself to look over the house, my dear Mrs Percy. And Connie, too! That is an honour. However, in this case, you will be rewarded. You will find the Whyte girls delightful and most desirable companions for her, Mrs Percy—Evey especially.’

Mamma grew rather white, and gave a little gasp.

‘*Evie*,’ she whispered (I spell it ‘*Evie*,’ because I know that was how mamma *thought* it)—‘do you hear, Connie?’

‘Yes, of course,’ I said rather sharply. No one else noticed mamma, for Lady Honor had turned to papa. I felt half-provoked. I wished the little Whyte girl had not been called ‘*Evie*.’ ‘Mamma will always be mixing her up with our *Evie*, and thinking her a sort of angel,’ I thought to myself, and something very like a touch of ugly jealousy crept into my heart. Just at that moment, unluckily, Lady Honor glanced my way again.

‘Are you quite well again, Connie?’ she said. ‘You don’t look very bright, my dear.—She needs companionship, doctor—companionship of her own age, as I have always told you. It will do her good in every way—yes, in *every* way;’ and she tapped the umbrella which she was carrying emphatically on the

ground, while she nodded her head and looked at me with the greatest satisfaction in her bright old eyes. I am not sure that there was not a little touch of mischief mingled with the satisfaction—a sort of good-natured spitefulness, if there could be such a thing! And perhaps it was not to be wondered at: ‘bright’ I certainly was not looking, and indeed I fear there must have been something very like sulkiness in my face just then. ‘Sweet Content!’ Lady Honor went on, half under her breath, as if speaking to herself—‘a very pretty name and a very lovely character. I was telling the Whyte children about it when I was with them the other day.’

Mamma flushed with pleasure, but I felt inwardly furious. I was sure the old lady was mocking at me; afterwards I felt glad that papa had not seen my face just then.

For the rest of the way, after we had

said good-bye to Lady Honor, I was quite silent. If it had not been for very shame, I would have asked to be put down at our own house when we passed it instead of going on to Fuller's shop. And mamma's gentle coaxing only made me crosser.

'I am sure you are too tired, darling,' she kept saying. 'You don't think you have caught cold? Do say, if you feel at all chilly?'

And when I grunted some short, surly reply, she only grew more and more anxious, till at last papa turned round and looked at me.

'She is all right, Rose,' he said. 'It is as mild as possible; leave the child alone. —At the same time, Connie,' he added to me, 'you must answer your mother more respectfully. You have nothing to be so cross about, my dear.'

I felt startled and almost frightened. It was very seldom papa found fault

with me. Yet there was something in his tone which prevented my feeling angry—something in his tone and in his eyes too. It was as if he was a little sorry for me. I felt myself redden, and I think one or two tears crept up.

‘I am sorry,’ I said gently.

Papa’s face brightened at once, and this made it easier for me to master myself. We were just at Fuller’s by this time. I went in with papa and mamma, and after a minute or two I found it was not difficult to talk as usual, and to feel really interested in the papers. Papa and mamma chose very nice ones for the dining and drawing rooms, and I was asked my opinion about them all, especially about the schoolroom one. Then came the bedroom ones, most of which were quickly decided upon. I grew very anxious indeed when mamma asked to see the pale-gray-with-roses one, which had been in the window a week or two



I was asked my opinion about them all.

ago. Fuller's man knew it at once and brought it out.

'It is beautiful,' he said—'a French paper, but expensive.'

And so it was, dearer than the one chosen for the dining-room! But papa glanced at it and then at me with a smile.

'Yes,' he said, 'I will have that one for the bedroom to the right—the room off the passage up the first stair.'

'Oh papa! *thank* you,' I said earnestly. And I meant it.

I have told all these little things to make you understand as well as I can the mixture of feelings I had about the Whyte children even before I ever saw them. Now I will skip a bit of time, and go on to tell about how things actually turned out.

Things *almost never* turn out as one expects; the older one gets the more one sees this, especially about things one has thought of and planned a good deal. I

had planned the first seeing the Whytes ever so many times in my own mind, always in the same way, you know, but with little additions and improvements the more I thought it over. The general idea of my plan was this: It was to be a lovely day; I was to ride over with papa one morning; Hoppie was to be looking his sweetest; and as we rode up to the house I was to see (and pretend not to see, of course) a lot of heads peeping out of a window to admire the little girl and her pony. Then we should be shown into the drawing-room, which I had furnished in my own mind rather shabbily and stiffly, and Captain and Mrs Whyte would come in and begin thanking papa for all his kindness, and would speak to me *very* nicely and rather admiringly, and Mrs Whyte would sigh a very little as if she wished her daughters were more like me. She would say how *very* much they wanted to know me, and she would beg

papa to stay a few minutes longer while she called them. She would be very kind, but rather fussy and anxious. Then the girls would come in, looking very eager, but shy. They were to be smaller than I, and younger-looking, very shabbily dressed, but nice, and very admiring. I would talk to them encouragingly, and they would tell me how beautiful they thought the rose paper, and that Lady Honor had told them I had chosen it—at least, *perhaps* it should be Lady Honor; I was not quite sure—sometimes I planned that papa should smile and it should come out by accident, as it were. Then this should lead us to talk of flowers, and I would tell them how they might make winter nosegays to brighten up the drawing-room a little, and I would promise them some flowers out of our conservatory, and papa would ask Mrs Whyte to let them come to have tea with me the next day, and they

would look delighted though half-afraid, and they would all come to the door to see me mount, and—and—on and on I would go for hours, in my fancies, of which 'I' and 'we' were always the centre, the pivot on which everything else revolved!

Now I will tell what really happened.

It was about six weeks after the day that I had gone with papa and mamma to the Yew Trees. So it was within a fortnight of Christmas. Mamma and I had been to the Yew Trees again once or twice to see how things were getting on; but for the last ten days or so we had not gone, as the Whytes' two servants and their furniture had come, and the house was now, therefore, to all intents and purposes theirs; and one morning a letter from Captain Whyte to papa announced that he and Mrs Whyte and 'some of our numerous youngsters' were to arrive the same day.

‘Poor things,’ said mamma with a little shiver, ‘how I do pity them removing at this season!’

‘But it isn’t cold,’ said papa. ‘So far it has been an unusually mild winter, though certainly we have had a disagreeable amount of rain.’

He glanced out as he spoke. It was not raining, but it looked dull and gloomy.

‘I suppose there is nothing we can do to help the Whytes?’ said mamma. ‘You will tell me, Tom, if you think there is.’

‘I almost think the kindest thing in such circumstances is to leave people alone till they shake down a little,’ he replied. ‘However, I shall be passing that way this evening, and I’ll look in for a moment. Captain Whyte won’t mind me.’

I didn’t think any one could ever ‘mind’ papa. I suppose it comes partly from his being a doctor and knowing so much about home things, children and

illnesses, and so on, that he is so wonderfully sensible and handy and tender in his ways—‘like a woman,’ Prudence says; but indeed I don’t think there are many women like *him*—and I don’t think it can be all from his being a doctor; it must be a good deal from his own kind, tender, sympathising heart.

‘Please find out how soon we can go to see them at the Yew Trees,’ I said. ‘Perhaps I might ride there with you some morning on Hop-o’-my-thumb before mamma goes regularly to call.’

‘We’ll see,’ said papa, as he went off. Of course I was thinking of my imaginary programme, but papa did not know that.

When he came home that night I was disappointed to find that he had not seen any of the Whytes. Captain Whyte was out, and Mrs Whyte, after all, had not yet come. ‘Only Miss Whyte and two of the young gentlemen,’ the servant had said, and as papa had no very particular

reason for calling, he had not asked to see 'Miss Whyte.'

'Do you think she is one of the little girls?' I asked.

Papa shook his head.

'I don't know. She may be an aunt who has come to help,' he said.

This idea rather annoyed me. I had not planned for a helpful aunt; it disarranged things.

'Never mind, Connie,' said mamma, thinking I was disappointed. 'We shall soon know all about them. I should think we might call early next week. The old-fashioned rule in a country-place is to wait till you have seen people in church,' she added.

This was Wednesday. It was a good while to wait till next Monday or Tuesday. However, I set to work at my fancies again, determining all the same to ride past the Yew Trees as often as I could this week. It would be rather

nice and romantic for them to have seen me riding about without knowing who I was, before they actually met me.

Whom I meant by 'they' I am not quite sure. I fancy I did the Whyte girls the compliment of placing them *next* in importance to myself in my drama.

'I wonder,' I thought, 'if Lady Honor told them *nicely* of my being called "Sweet Content," or if she said it mockingly. It was horrid of her if she did.'



CHAPTER IV.

ALL MY OWN FAULT.

‘WHAT are you in such a brown study about, Connie?’ asked mamma at breakfast the next morning.

I started.

‘Nothing very particular,’ I said, and I felt myself get red. I should not have liked mamma to know my thoughts—I was rehearsing for the hundredth time the scene of my first meeting with the Whytes, or rather, I should say, of their first meeting *me*. Just as mamma spoke I was wondering how I could persuade papa to let me ride over with him before mamma paid her more formal call at the Yew Trees.

Mamma smiled but did not press for an answer.

‘I must go and order dinner,’ she said, rising from her seat rather wearily. Papa had already gone out. ‘How nice it will be when you are grown-up, my Sweet Content, and able to help me with the housekeeping!’

‘Oh dear! I hope you will have a housekeeper when you get tired of it,’ I said. ‘You never need count upon me for anything to do with eating and cooking, mamma. I should hate ordering dinners and looking over the butcher’s and grocer’s books. You wouldn’t like to see me a second Anna Gale, I hope?’

‘No, indeed, dear; that you never could be. Poor Anna has no brains, and she is so very dowdy—though perhaps that sounds unkind, for she is a very good girl.’ And mamma looked rather shocked at herself.

‘But one may be good without being *quite* so dull and “dowdy,”’ I said coaxingly.

Mamma stooped to kiss me as she passed my chair. 'I trust you will never have to do any uncongenial work, my darling,' she said. 'You shall not if I can help it.'

I remained where I was for a minute or two, thinking what I would best like to do that morning. It was a holiday, for my daily governess had got a slight cold and sore throat, and till *quite* satisfied that it was nothing infectious mamma had decided that she had better not come. I was rather sorry than otherwise, for I by no means disliked my lessons, and in dull weather the time was apt to hang heavily. There was no question of my going out for a ride, for, though not actually raining, it looked as if it might do so any moment.

'I may as well do the flowers in the drawing-room,' I said to myself. This was one of the few things I did regularly for mamma, and I am afraid its being regularly done was greatly owing to my

liking it! I sauntered into the conservatory, glancing round to see what flowers I could cut without spoiling the appearance there; then through the conservatory I sauntered on into the drawing-room. The housemaid, a young girl whom I was not at all in awe of, was giving the room its morning cleaning. It was *nearly* done, but there remained the last touches—the laying down the hearth-rug and removing one or two dust-sheets, and replacing some of the ornaments lying about—without which, however clean a room really is, it looks, of course, messy and disorderly.

‘Oh Eliza, why isn’t the drawing-room done?’ I exclaimed. ‘I want to arrange the flowers, and I can’t have you fussing about while I am doing them. You must leave it for a quarter of an hour.’

The girl looked round regretfully.

‘I’d have done in five minutes, Miss Connie,’ she said; ‘I would indeed. I’m

no later than usual, but you don't often come in here so early; and the fire isn't lighted, and you with your cold,' she added, as if that would decide matters.

'Oh, bother my cold!' I said. 'It's not chilly in here, with the door open into the conservatory. I *must* do the flowers now, or I can't do them at all, and those in the glasses are very withered.'

Eliza gave in. But as she was turning away, leaving her dust-pan and brushes behind her, she stopped short again.

'Oh, Miss Connie!' she exclaimed, 'your frock's all out of the gathers at the left side; and there's a hole in your elbow.'

'I know,' I said composedly; 'I caught it in the balusters—the skirt, I mean; but I didn't know about the elbow. That's Prue's fault, but it doesn't matter; I'll change it before luncheon.' And I set to work at my flowers.

It was interesting work. There was a tap where you could draw cold water in

the conservatory, and a little table on which I always arranged the flowers. And I had no trouble in getting rid of the withered ones. I threw them in a heap on the floor, and the gardener carried them away. But, all the same, I made myself rather dirty; my hands were smudged with mould, and some of it had got on to my face by the time I was half through my task. And as I had particular ideas about arranging the colours, and so on, I was very deliberate in my movements. Quite half-an-hour must have passed, and I had not begun to think of calling Eliza back to finish putting the drawing-room in order, when there came a ring at the front-door bell.

‘Who can that be?’ I thought to myself, though without much interest in the matter. ‘Some one ringing by mistake for the surgery-bell; people are so stupid.’

For rings at the front-door were comparatively rare, and really confined to

the postman and visitors for mamma, as, besides the surgery-bell, there is a side-door for trades-people.

I thought no more about it till suddenly the drawing-room door opened, and I heard Benjamin the 'boy'—Benjamin was not even a 'buttons,' and he only answered the front-door bell in the morning, while Eliza was busy 'with the rooms,' as housemaids say—in colloquy with some person or persons unseen.

'Step this way, please, sir,' he was saying with his broadest accent, as I ran forward, torn frock, dirty hands, smudged face and all, to see who it could possibly be.

Oh dear! *How* I wished I had not yielded to my curiosity; *how* I wished I had run out by the door of the conservatory into the garden; *HOW* I wished I had not interrupted Eliza at her work, which would by this time have been neatly accomplished!

For there stood before me a tall, handsome man, younger-looking than papa—very young-looking to be the father of the girl at his side—a girl quite half a head taller than I, with grave, considerate eyes and a quiet, pale face. She was dressed very simply, but with extreme neatness. All that I took in in less than an instant, even while I felt my face growing scarlet, and I seemed conscious of but one intense wish—that the ground would open and swallow me and the drawing-room up! Yes, the room was worse than I. I did not care so much for my own appearance at any time, but the drawing-room—— It looked so messy and horrid—so *common*, too, ‘as if we only kept one servant,’ I said to myself, ‘and could not afford to have the fire lighted early.’ And to know that it was all my own doing!

A smile flickered over the gentleman’s face; he must have seen how wretchedly



I am sure she was as sorry for me as she could be.

awkward and ashamed I looked; my burning cheeks must have told their own tale. But the girl only looked at me gravely, though very gently. I am sure she was as sorry for me as she could be.

‘I am afraid,’ Captain Whyte said at last—all this time I was blocking up the doorway, remember—‘that we are taking a great liberty in disturbing Mrs Percy so very early, but’——

Here the girl interrupted.

‘You are busy arranging your flowers,’ she said. ‘*May* we look at the conservatory?—Perhaps, papa, Miss Percy can tell us all we want to know.’

And before I knew where I was she had crossed the room, not seeming even to *see* that it was in a mess, and we were all three standing in the conservatory, which, of course, though rather untidy, did not look nearly so bad as the drawing-room.

'*How pretty your flowers are!*' she went on, and one could see that she meant it. —'Papa, do look at those begonias; but shouldn't we introduce ourselves first?' And she gave a nice, little, kind sort of laugh.

'I know who you are,' I said, as I awkwardly rubbed my hands on my apron to clean them from the mould. 'I—I can't shake hands—but—it's all my fault that the fire isn't lighted and the room so messy. Mamma will be very vexed; she's always ready as early as this to see any one.'

'We have unfortunately lost the address of the "odd man" that Dr Percy was so good as to give us, and we find ourselves sadly in want of his services already,' said Captain Whyte. 'There are one or two other points we should be grateful for a little advice about, too, but these can wait.'

I was beginning to recover my presence

of mind a little by this time, though with it, alas! an increased feeling of mortification.

‘I will fetch mamma,’ I began; but Captain Whyte interrupted.

‘Please don’t disturb her,’ he said.

I felt more and more vexed.

‘I believe they think she’s a vulgar, fussy old thing like Agnes Gale’s aunt,’ I said to myself—‘never fit to be seen till the afternoon.’

‘It won’t disturb her at all,’ I said. ‘Mamma is never very busy.’

And just as I spoke I heard her voice from the drawing-room.

‘Connie dear,’ it said, ‘where are you, and what’s the matter with the drawing-room?’ Oh, how glad I was that she said that! ‘Benjamin said some one wanted me;’ and then catching sight of figures in the conservatory, in mamma came.

They started a little, and no wonder

that they were surprised. Thanks to me, they had small reason to expect much in Mrs Percy. Never in all my life did I feel prouder of mamma, or more grateful for her unfailing sweet temper. Just think, many a mother in such a case would have come through the drawing-room scolding for finding it in such a mess; her voice would have been heard sharp and angry before she was seen. And many, even sweet-tempered women, would have been upset and flurried. Not so my dear little mother. She came in looking so sweet, and so neat and pretty, with just a little half-smile of amusement on her face. 'What is the matter, Connie dear?' she repeated, and then she caught sight of the strangers.

I flew to her side.

'Mamma dear,' I said—I was not often so gentle, but I was humbled for once—'it is Captain Whyte and Miss Whyte. It is all my fault about the drawing-

room. I would not let Eliza finish it, because she was in the way when I was doing the flowers.'

Then mamma glanced at me, and I saw that she had to make some effort not to look vexed at the state I myself was in.

'My dear child!' she exclaimed. But in an instant she was shaking hands with our visitors.

'I am so sorry,' she said.

'Nay,' Captain Whyte replied, 'it is our place to apologise. I only ventured to intrude so early'—

But mamma interrupted him.

'Won't you come into the dining-room?' she said. 'It will be more comfortable.'

And so it certainly was, though it was the very thing of all others I would have hated. I had so often mocked at the Gales for never using their drawing-room except on great occasions, and always

huddling together in the dining-room. But our dining-room did look nice that morning. It was as neat as could be, and the window was a tiny bit open, and a bright fire burning, and on a small table in the window stood a pretty glass with one or two late roses and a trail of ivy, which mamma had just gathered in the garden outside.

Captain Whyte walked towards the fireplace and stood on the hearth-rug, talking to mamma. Miss Whyte drew nearer the window, where I followed her.

‘How sweet these late roses are!’ she said. ‘You and Mrs Percy must be very fond of flowers.’

‘Yes,’ I said, stupidly enough. I could see she thought me shy and awkward, and that made me still more so.

‘And what a dear garden you have!’ she went on, evidently anxious to set me at my ease, ‘just as if I had been Agnes Gale,’ I thought. ‘Our garden at

the Yew Trees will be very nice, but I do love those walled-in gardens at the back of a house in a street. I always think there's a sort of surprise about them which makes them still nicer. Do you do much gardening yourself, Miss — No, won't you tell me your first name?

'Connie,' I blurted out.

A smile lighted up her grave little face.

"'Connie!'" she repeated. 'Oh yes, I remember. Is that the short for'— but then she stopped abruptly, murmuring something about 'Lady Honor;' and for the first time *she* looked a little shy. It made me feel pleased.

'I suppose,' I said, rather disagreeably— 'I suppose Lady Honor made fun of my baby-name?'

Miss Whyte looked puzzled and surprised.

'Made fun of it!' she said. 'Of course not. We all thought it *so* sweet—"Sweet Content," I mean—and what Lady Honor said has made us look forward ever so

much to knowing you. I think it was a little *that*,' she went on, smiling again, 'that made me beg papa to bring me with him this morning.'

How ashamed I felt! It seemed as if I were to do nothing but be ashamed this morning—and this time with more reason. My ugly suspicions of Lady Honor *were* something to be ashamed of. She had always been a true and kind friend; and just because she did not flatter and spoil me I could not trust the good old lady.

'Oh,' I began, 'I didn't mean—I thought perhaps'—— Then I stopped short. 'My real name is Constantia,' I went on hurriedly, 'not Constance. I think Constantia prettier; don't you?'

'It is more uncommon; it's like my name. People think mine is Eva or Evelyn, when they hear me called'——

'Evey!' came her father's voice across the room. We both laughed.

‘Wasn’t that funny?’ said Evey, as she turned with a ‘Yes, papa.’

‘Wasn’t there something else rather particular that you had to ask about, if possible, at once?’ said Captain Whyte. ‘Mrs Percy is so kind.’

Evey went towards my mother; a very business-like expression came over her face.

‘It’s about the laundress, Mrs Percy. Mother would be so glad to know of one at once. You see, there are so many of us, it’s an important consideration. Mother will be here by Tuesday, we hope, and it would be nice for her to find it arranged, and all the things sent for the week. It was one of the reasons she was sorry not to come at once herself—to see about it.’

‘I hope it was not illness that delayed Mrs Whyte’s coming,’ said mamma kindly.

‘Not her own,’ said Captain Whyte; ‘but

one of the boys had caught cold—he's our delicate one, and very subject to croup. So it was safer to wait, and Evey and I came on with the three other small ones and one big one, leaving Mary and Joss to help their mother with the invalid.'

'I am sure I can find you a nice laundress,' said mamma, on which Evey's brow cleared.

'And not dear?' the little girl asked—for, after all, she *was* a little girl, barely thirteen.

Mamma could not help smiling. Evey was so business-like.

'I think Mrs Whyte would find our laundress reasonable,' she said. 'Indeed, I don't think any prices about here are extortionate.'

'That is one of the recommendations of Elmwood to us,' said Captain Whyte, smiling.—'But, Evey, we have really intruded on Mrs Percy too long.—Thank

you so very much for your kind help.' And he turned to go.

'I will not forget to send Mrs Green, the washerwoman, to speak to you,' said mamma, as she shook hands with Evey.

'Oh yes, thank you—this evening, please, if possible,' the little girl replied.



CHAPTER V.

A LARGE FAMILY.

AFTER they had gone, neither mamma nor I spoke for a minute or two. I did not quite know what to say, and I was not sorry to have some little time to consider, while mamma quickly wrote a few words on a sheet of paper, which she folded and addressed to Mrs Green. Then she rang for Benjamin, and told him to take the note at once and bring back an answer.

‘I could have taken it, mamma,’ I said.
‘Mrs Green’s is so near.’

It was not often I volunteered any little service of this kind, but somehow I had a wish to be of use to Evey Whyte too, and I spoke in a matter-of-

fact way, as if it was quite a usual thing for me to do.

‘Thank you, dear,’ said mamma. ‘I don’t think you should go out till we see what the day is going to be. Your cold is not quite gone yet.’

‘Oh, bother!’ I said crossly. ‘Mamma, I wish you would not fuss so. I’m sure that little girl looks far more delicate than I, and she’s out. I only wish I had gone out *quite* early, and then they wouldn’t have come in and found everything in such a mess.’

‘I mind the most their seeing you yourself in such a mess,’ said mamma regretfully. ‘I don’t think you should do the flowers if it dirties you so.’

‘Oh, I *needn’t* be so dirty,’ I said. ‘But I didn’t mind that half as much as the drawing-room;’ and then I had to explain how I had interfered with the housemaid.

‘It can’t be helped,’ mamma replied.

‘They are nice, kind people, I am sure, and the next time they come we must have things ready. Besides, such a large family as they are, they can’t be always in apple-pie order themselves. Connie,’ she went on, ‘did you hear that dear child’s name?’

‘Of course,’ I said rather sharply. ‘They call her Evey, but her name’s not “Eva” nor “Evelyn”—she told me so, and she was just going to tell me her real name when Captain Whyte called to her. I dare say it’s some name not the least like “Eva.”’

‘Oh,’ said mamma in a tone of disappointment, ‘I had hoped it was.’

In my heart I was sorry for her. How gentle and kind she was! And when I went upstairs to wash my hands I had even more reason to think so, for when I looked in the glass—oh dear!—what an untidy, dirty little girl I saw! There was a smear of mould all down one cheek,

some of which I had rubbed on to my nose, and my hair was straggling and my frock torn, as I have said. 'I would have scolded *my* daughter dreadfully if I had been mamma,' I said to myself. And I got hot and red all over when I thought of my grand plans and pictures of my first meeting with our new friends.

My next meeting with them, though different from this first one, was also quite different from my fancies. We saw the Whytes in church on Sunday—not Mrs Whyte; she was not to come until Monday—but Captain Whyte and Evey and a big boy—quite big, looking almost grown-up—and three small ones, dear little fellows in sailor suits, all in a row, between Evey and the big brother. And they were so good! Evey herself was as neat as could be, and her jacket and hat were a very nice shape, and her hair prettily done. Altogether I began to be afraid the Whytes were not the sort of people

I could at all 'show off' to (not that I called it 'showing off' to myself). And after church I saw Lady Honor hurry up to them, and I *felt* she was asking them all to go home with her to luncheon. So I walked on rather gloomily beside mamma.

'I don't think I want to know the Whytes,' I said; 'I think they're very stuck-up.'

Mamma stared at me in astonishment.

'Connie dear,' she said, 'that simple child? And so plainly dressed, too! She might rather think it of you, I'm afraid.'

But she glanced at me so proudly as she said it that my self-love felt rather smoothed down than otherwise.

'I am glad for little Miss Whyte to see that you are not *usually* going about in a torn frock and with a dirty face,' mamma went on. 'Of course, Mrs Whyte could not afford to dress several children

as one can dress an only one, though they certainly look very neat. I am sure every one must admire that jacket of yours, Connie; it is really very pretty.'

It was a new jacket, dark-brown velvet, very handsomely trimmed with fur; rather *too* handsome altogether, I now think, for a girl of the age I was then. But I had been very well pleased with it and the cap to match, and it had struck me—though really I was *not* vain of my looks, nor much interested in my clothes—as I was dressing, that my fair, long hair looked nice on the rich, dark velvet. Now, however, I gave myself a dissatisfied shake.

'I don't think I like it, mamma. I would much rather have a tweed jacket and frock the same. I think velvet and fur are rather vulgar. And—mamma—I wish you'd cut my hair off. I think Evey Whyte looks so nice with her short, dark, curly hair.' I forget if I

have said that Evey's hair was almost as short as a boy's.

Mamma gasped. 'Cut off your hair, Connie!' she said. 'My Sweet Content's great beauty! Cut off your hair, Connie!'

I was beginning a rather cross reply, when steps behind us—short, quick, pattering steps—made both mamma and me look round. A little boy in a sailor suit was running after us, and behind him again, at some little distance, we saw Evey also running.

'Oh, please, please stop!' panted the small boy. He was the biggest of the three we had seen in church. 'Evey's got something to say to you, Mrs Percy.'

He tugged off his cap as he spoke, and stood smiling up at us—his round, rosy face all in a glow. He was a dear, sun-burnt little fellow, not the least shy, and yet not a bit forward.

'I am so sorry we did not hear you coming before,' said mamma kindly; 'you

have run so far. I hope you won't get cold from being so overheated,' she added anxiously.

'Oh no, thank you. I never catch cold. It's only Addie that catches cold,' the boy replied. He evidently thought we must know who Addie was, and all about him or her. And by this time Evey's voice was heard near at hand.

'How do you do, Mrs Percy?' she said. 'I hope you didn't mind Charley running after you? It was Lady Honor sent him, and I've come to explain. She wants to know if you will let Connie—mayn't I say "Connie"?—come to luncheon at her house with all of us. We're *all* going. Isn't it kind? Charley and Douglas and Tot and papa and Lancey too. Oh, do let Connie come! I'm the only girl, and I do feel so funny without Mary.'

She was so bright and eager, it would have been difficult to refuse. My contradictory humour melted away before her

heartiness, and I smiled back in answer to the unspoken inquiry in mamma's face.

'Certainly, my dear; I shall be delighted for Connie to go. Please thank Lady Honor very much. Shall I send for her in the afternoon?'

'Oh, please, we can bring her home. We aren't going to church, because we're not very settled yet, and the servants couldn't go this morning, so we shall be going home by ourselves and passing your house before four o'clock. Connie won't spoil her things,' she added considerably, glancing at my smart attire, 'for we sha'n't be romping, as it is Sunday.'

'Oh, I'm not afraid. Connie is not a great frock-tearer,' said mamma, smiling, though she spoke quickly. I think she was afraid that my appearance the other day was still in Evey's memory.—'Then good-bye, Connie, till four o'clock.—And

good-bye, Master Charley, and many thanks.—Thank you, too, Miss Whyte, very much.'

Then we separated, mamma continuing her way home, quite happy in my happiness, while I retraced my steps with Evey and her brother. Evey glanced over her shoulder at mamma.

'You don't mind Mrs Percy going home alone, I hope?' she said, half-anxiously.

It had never struck me that there was anything to mind!

'Oh, of course not,' I said.

Evey looked a little sorry, but walked on.

'I didn't mean'—— she began. 'At least, I only meant'—— Then her face cleared. She evidently thought she had hit upon an explanation of my indifference. 'I see,' she said; 'it must be quite different when one is an only child. Your mother *must* be alone sometimes; it isn't like ours. You see, there are such a lot of us; she would feel quite miserable if there weren't

some of us with her. At least, she says so;’ and Evey laughed merrily.

‘Perhaps,’ I said, half-mischievously, ‘she says it a *little* out of politeness. I think grown-up people all do like to be alone *sometimes*.’

We both laughed at this, and then the remains of shyness that had hung about seemed quite to disappear. But I did not forget Evey’s gentle anxiety about mamma.

We soon came up to the others, who were all walking on slowly together—such a party they looked! Captain Whyte and old Mr Bickersteth in front, then Lady Honor and the big boy Lancey, and the two smaller sailor-suits, Tot and Douglas, as Evey had called them, now joined by Charley, bringing up the rear.

‘What a lot of you there must be when you are all together!’ I exclaimed, not very politely, I am afraid, to Evey. She smiled, as if she thought it rather a compliment.

‘Yes,’ she said—we were walking rather more slowly now to get back our breath, as Lady Honor had nodded back to us to show it was all right—‘yes, eight are a good many, and, somehow, so many being boys makes it seem even more, in the house above all. Boys can’t help being noisy, you see.’

She said it in such an old-fashioned way that I couldn’t help smiling.

‘I don’t know much about boys,’ I said. ‘I think I’d rather have sisters.’

‘Oh no, you wouldn’t,’ replied Evey quickly. ‘You don’t *know* how nice brothers are. When you see Joss’—— But here she had to break off. Lady Honor had stepped back a pace or two to speak to us. Her face looked very kind and pleased, and there was nothing the least ‘mocking,’ as I called it to myself, in her tone.

‘That’s right, Connie, my dear,’ she said, as she shook hands with me. ‘Very

good of your dear mother to let you come.—Now, is it your place or mine, Evey, to introduce all those brothers of yours to Miss Percy, or shall we let things settle themselves?—You *will* learn them all in time, Connie, though it may seem at first as if you never would.'

In Evey's place I should probably have been rather offended at this; but, on the contrary, both she and her brothers seemed to think the old lady's joke very amusing.

'I'll introduce them by telling Connie all their names and ages, thank you, Lady Honor,' she answered brightly.—'Come on, Connie; it will take some time, I warn you.'

We ran on a little way together, Lady Honor looking quite pleased. It was easy to see that she really wanted Evey and me to be friends, and I felt gratified at this.

'It will be nice for Evey sometimes to

get out of all that crowd of boys,' I thought to myself. 'I dare say Lady Honor thinks being with me may make her quiet and refined;' though, truth to tell, for all her simplicity, I had seen no touch of anything the least rough or hoydenish in my new friend.

'Lady Honor is always so funny, isn't she?' was Evey's first remark, as soon as we were out of hearing. 'Papa says it's delightful to see an old person so fresh and merry. But she has such a kind heart: that keeps people young more than anything,' she added, in her wise way.

'Yes,' I agreed, 'she is very kind; but sometimes she's rather'—'rather sharp,' I was going to say, but something in Evey's eyes made me hesitate—'I mean I sometimes am a very little frightened of her.'

'You needn't be,' said Evey composedly. 'If you had ever stayed in the house

with her for weeks together, as we do at my uncle's at Christmas, you would see that she's just *quite* good.'

I could not say anything more after that, and Evey evidently wanted to change the subject.

'Shall I tell you *us*, now?' she began again, laughingly. 'That big Lancey is the eldest of us—he's sixteen, and, of course, his name's Lancelot. Then comes Joss—he's Jocelyn—those two names and mine are very—what's the word—not "fanciful," but something like that.'

'Fantastic,' I suggested.

'Yes, that's it. How clever of you to know!' she said admiringly. 'At least they sound so, though really the boys' names are both family ones.'

'But yours,' I interrupted, 'isn't a very fanciful one—"Eva" or "Evelyn"—oh, no; you said it wasn't one of these. I forgot.'

'It's Yvonne,' said Evey. 'It's a French name—a very old French name. A cousin

of mother's was called Yvonne first, and I'm named after her. Then, after these three names, we get quite sensible. Next to me is Mary; "plain Mary" we call her in fun, because she's the prettiest of us! And then come Addie and Charley and Douglas and Tot. Addie's the delicate one, and Charley and the two little ones you've seen.'

'What a lot of boys!' I said, my breath nearly taken away.

'Yes,' said Evey, laughing; 'and, fancy, now they'll all be living at home. Won't it be nice? Till now, you know, Lancey and Joss have been away at school, but now they'll all be at home; at least till Lancey goes to India.' And for the first time Evey sighed a little at this doleful prospect.

'Dear me!' I thought to myself, 'surely they'll be glad to get rid of a few of them. I should think their mother would, anyway.'

But, as if she answered my thought, Evey went on: 'Mother can't bear to think of Lancey going; nor Joss either, and I suppose he'll have to go too. We have an uncle there who is a tea-planter; they're going to him. Joss would give anything not to—he wants to go to college, but of course it's *impossible*, so we never speak about it.'

'And doesn't Lancey mind?' I said.

'Not so much, except just for leaving us. But it's no good thinking of things long before they come. We've settled that we're going to be as happy as anything at the Yew Trees for two years at least. Oh, how nice it is, and *how* kind your father has been about putting it in order! We've never had a house at all like it before; our house at Southsea was so—just like other houses, you know.'

I felt more on my own ground now.

'I am so pleased you like the Yew Trees,' I said amiably. 'It is a nice old house,

and it *might* be made quite perfect. If we ever went to live in it ourselves I dare say we should change it a good deal; but I don't think we ever shall. When papa retires—and I hope he will before I'm grown-up—mamma and I want to travel a good deal, and perhaps to live in London. One gets tired of a little country place.'

Yvonne looked at me quite simply.

'Do you think so?' she said. 'I feel as if we should never get tired of Elmwood. And the people all seem so kind. London seems so very big; but then, of course, I haven't been *very* much there.'

My conscience pricked me.

'Well, I haven't either,' I said; 'but still'— I had really only been there once, and for one week!

'We always stay with mother's god-mother for a month every summer in London, Mary and I, and mother comes for the last fortnight. Mother's god-

mother is very kind, and we have very good music-lessons—she gives us them—she is Lady Honor's sister. But we *are* always so glad to come home again.'

I could not understand her, but I thought it wiser to say no more about London and its attractions. Nor was I sorry when Evey suddenly changed the conversation by exclaiming:

'Oh Connie, I have so wanted to thank you about the rose paper! Lady Honor told us. You can't think how lovely it looks—you must come and see. Father says I may have pink ribbons to tie up the curtains, and *perhaps* pink on the dressing-table—we shall fix when mother comes. I think we could trim the table ourselves. Perhaps you could help us, Connie? Are you clever at things like that?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I don't think I ever tried. The servants always do up the dressing-tables, I suppose.'

'Oh yes, of course, you have more servants, and they haven't so much to do as ours. But you know, Connie, we're really very poor indeed, so we *have* to do things ourselves, especially if we want any extra things—pretty things. I dare say you can't understand how careful we have to be. But we're very happy all the same.'

'I suppose people get accustomed to things,' I said. 'I don't think I should like to be poor at all. You see, I've always had everything I wanted. But I should like very much to help you if ever I could.'

I meant to be gracious. I am afraid I was only patronising. Vague thoughts of presents to Evey and the others out of my lavish pocket-money were in my mind; fortunately, I did not express them, and Evey, in the dignity of her simplicity, took my offer of 'help' quite differently.

'I think very likely you could give me some ideas about the dressing-table,' she said consideringly. 'I'm sure you have good taste—because of that lovely paper.'

And just then we found ourselves at Mr Bickersteth's gate.



CHAPTER VI

NEW IDEAS.

THAT luncheon and afternoon, or part of an afternoon, at Lady Honor's were very nice, and yet rather strange to me. I had so seldom been among several young people that I scarcely felt at home; and the Whytes in themselves were unlike any children I had ever known. They were not the least shy—far less so, really, than I was. I remember getting very hot and red when I knocked over a glass of water, and Evey, who was sitting next me, made me feel still worse by her open and outspoken fears that I would spoil my frock. She thought it was that that I was so distressed about.

'I don't care a bit about my frock,' I

said to her quite crossly. 'If it is spoilt I can get another. It is only that I hate to look so awkward.'

'Everybody does awkward things sometimes. If you don't mind about your frock, I don't see that a little spilt water matters much,' said Evey, looking at me in her straightforward way. 'Lady Honor isn't vexed—are you, Lady Honor?' she said loud out, turning to the old lady.

'Of course not; there's no harm done. Don't look at me as if I were Red Riding Hood's grandmother, my dear child,' she said in her funny way, meaning to be kind to me, of course; and Evey meant to be kind too, but I suppose it was that I didn't know Lady Honor as well as they did; and still more, I dare say, it was from my habit of thinking about myself so much, and fancying other people were noticing me, when very likely they weren't, that I felt so horrid.

I forgot about it, however, after luncheon, when we all went out into the garden. Yvonne was so kind! She felt a little, I think, as if I were her visitor, and she just did everything she possibly could to make me enjoy myself; and the boys were all very nice too. I could not have believed that boys could be so nice, for I had always had rather a horror of them. I said so to Evey; she seemed pleased at my liking her brothers, but amused, too, at my ideas about boys.

‘You must see us when we are all together,’ she said. ‘Fancy, besides Mary, two more boys! Though Addie is scarcely like a boy; he’s the delicate one, you know. But he is so brave. I think it’s almost more brave of *him* to be brave than if he were strong and big, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘It’s what is called moral courage, isn’t it?’

‘It’s that, and the other too,’ Evey

replied. 'Or perhaps he's able to make himself brave the other way by having moral courage. I suppose it's that; anyway, I do *love* Addie. Oh Connie! you wouldn't think that way about boys if you had brothers.'

'Not if they were like yours,' I said; 'but I have seen some brothers that weren't at all nice to their sisters.'

'Then I'm sure it was the sisters' fault; anyway, a good deal their fault,' Evey returned promptly. 'I'm just the opposite of you, for, do you know, I have often longed to be a boy; and so has Mary. If we had all been boys it would have been easier for father and mother. I almost think they'd have gone to the colonies.'

'How *horrible!*' I said. 'I am sure you should be glad you and Mary aren't boys, just to have stopped that.'

But Yvonne was not to be convinced.

'No,' she said. 'I think it would be

delightful—all going together, you know; and perhaps we may, some day, after all. It would be much better than staying in England, and the boys by themselves all over the world, and father and mother looking anxious; and you know,' she added, 'even Mary and I *mightn't* be able to stay at home. We might have to work somehow too.'

'Do you mean to be governesses?' I asked in a very appalled tone of voice. But Evey's reply appalled me still more.

'Perhaps, or, if not governesses, teachers of some kind, if we were good at teaching. But there are lots of other things for girls now. Father often talks about them. We might have some sort of business. Something like a big upholsterer's perhaps. That would be nice, for the boys might be in it too. And Joss could design things, he *is* so clever; and Lancey could keep the books. Lancey's very

good at figures. It would be almost as nice as going to the colonies.'

I stared at her.

'Evey,' I said, 'you are joking.'

But a glance at her face showed me she was quite in earnest.

'No, indeed,' she said. 'If people are poor they must work. Indeed, rich people often work hard too, though in a different way. What's there to be ashamed of?'

'But a *shop*,' I said with extreme disgust. 'That's not for ladies and gentlemen.'

'I don't see why, if they're poor and could get on that way. Of course, if the boys and we two were all together in it, you may be sure Mary and I would be given the nicest part of the work,' she said, smiling. 'And if we could earn enough to make father and mother *quite* comfortable when they get old, really not to have any bother at all and not to need to think about money, why,

what *would* we care what we did? We'd be'—here Evey stopped to find a sufficiently strong expression—'we'd be *chimney-sweeps*.'

This was rather a relief to my feelings. 'She knows they couldn't be chimney-sweeps,' I thought to myself, 'so very likely she's joking about a shop too.'

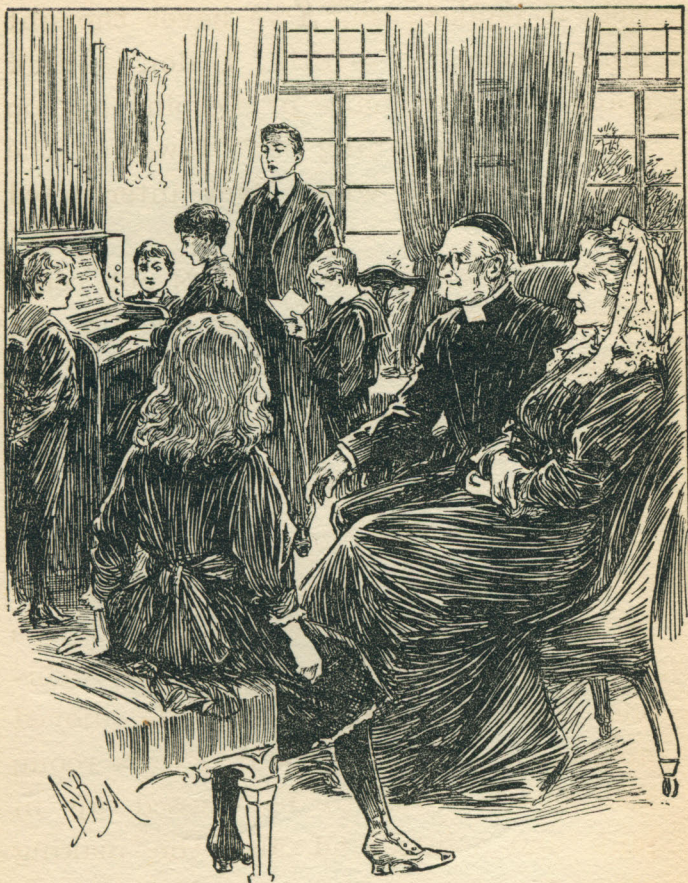
And I was still more satisfied when, a moment or two after, Yvonne added, 'Of course it's all castles in the air. I dare say'—and she sighed—'we shall never be able to do anything much, any of us—not even for father and mother. *They* say the best thing we can all do for them is each to be good in his or her own way. But one can't help sometimes wishing to do something big—oh, what heaps of nice things one could do for people if one were rich! We often plan them together—for father and mother first, you know.'

'Yes, I suppose it would be nice to be

rich,' I replied; 'but I've never thought much about it.'—'Still, I don't think going to the colonies or keeping a shop would be "something big,"' I was on the point of saying, when Evey interrupted me.

'No,' she said earnestly, 'it's not being rich; it's the things one would do. There's all the difference;' and perhaps it was as well I had not finished my sentence.

This conversation was not the part of the afternoon I enjoyed the most, nor did it take very long. I have told it because it helps to show Yvonne Whyte's way of looking at things, and the difference between her and me. I enjoyed much more talking about Evey's room, and how it was to be dressed up in pink and white, and also the making plans for meeting often, and discussing the lawn-tennis ground at the Yew Trees with Lancey. It was not a very



Evey played the accompaniment on Mr Bickersteth's chamber organ quite beautifully.

good one and had been neglected, but Captain Whyte and Lancey had great ideas about it, and Captain Whyte thanked me very nicely, though he smiled a little when I said rather pompously that I was sure they could have our garden-roller and the undergardener to help when the time came for attending to it.

Just before it was time to go, Lady Honor called us all in to sing a hymn. It was to please Mr Bickersteth, who was too feeble to go to church again. It was a long time since he had heard his young friends' voices, he said, looking at Yvonne and her brother, and their hymn should be his vespers to-day. And when I heard them I was not surprised at his wanting them to sing. Their voices were so nice; and, to my surprise, Evey played the accompaniment on Mr Bickersteth's chamber organ quite beautifully. I was very fond of music, so I really enjoyed

it, and for once forgot that I was not the centre of it all.

‘*How nice!*’ I exclaimed heartily, when it was over. And Lady Honor smiled at me when I said this in her very kindest way; for no one who does not know Lady Honor pretty well can fancy how kind her smiles *sometimes* are. ‘How have you learnt to play the organ so beautifully? It takes a lot of time, doesn’t it?’ I said to Evey.

‘Yes,’ said Lady Honor, replying for her. ‘But I have always found in my life, my dear Connie, that it is the people who have the most to do who do the most. Think that over—you’ll find it’s not an Irish bull, though it sounds like one.’

I was not so pleased at this speech.

‘She is thinking that I don’t do much, I can see,’ I began fancying. But Evey broke in upon my disagreeable thoughts.

‘I don’t think it’s any credit to me that I can play the organ a little, truly,’ she said. ‘I’ve had such good lessons every year in London, where we never really have anything to do except things like that. And at Southsea I was always allowed to practise on the church organ. We have a harmonium of our own,’ she went on to me. ‘It’s very nice, but of course not as nice as this dear organ;’ and she touched the keys lovingly. Mr Bickersteth’s organ was a very nice one indeed.

And a few minutes after that we went home. The Whytes, all six of them, escorted me all the way, as Lady Honor’s is not far from our house, and I showed them the short-cut across the fields to the Yew Trees through a turnstile close to us. It was very kind of them all the same, for they had to hurry a good deal after that to get home in time to send the servants to church.

I found mamma by herself in the study. We don't use the drawing-room on Sunday.

'Well, darling?' she said. I knew that meant a tender inquiry as to how I had enjoyed myself, but a rather contradictory mood had come over me.

'It was very nice,' I said. 'But they're not a bit like what I thought they would be, mamma. You know—when we heard they were so poor'—

'But they *are* poor,' she replied, 'and I'm sure they are not—they would not set themselves up in any disagreeable way. They seem so well-bred.'

'Ye-es,' I said. 'They're—oh, I think they are just everything they should be, whether they're poor or not. They're *much* cleverer than me, mamma. They've learnt so many things I haven't, and seen so much more. They go to London *every* year—and'—

My depressed, discontented tone must

have hurt and troubled mamma, for she answered indignantly:

‘It is very wrong and unkind of them—of that girl,’ she said, ‘to boast and show off to you, darling. You are too sensitive. I am quite sure they are not cleverer than my Connie, and as for looks—— You shall not see any more of them, dear. It would be quite new indeed for my Sweet Content to be made discontented. I am disappointed in Evey Whyte. I was sure she was so nice.’

There was a hot red spot on each of poor mamma’s cheeks; this state of things was not at all what I had bargained for. I had only wanted to work off my own dissatisfaction, which was partly jealousy, but partly too, I hope, a less unworthy feeling, by grumbling and by trying to put blame on those who had had the care of me. I was punished.

‘Oh no, no, mamma dear!’ I said eagerly.

'Evey's *not* like that. She's not the least *atom* boasting; it was more — things I noticed and asked about myself. It's not only that she's clever—you should hear how she can play the organ; but I dare say you'd let me learn it too, if I liked—it's—it's partly, mamma, that I can feel she's so much more useful and—and unselfish than I am. I can see it quite well; she does such a lot to help her mother and them all.'

And, greatly to mamma's surprise and distress, I leaned my head down on her lap and burst into tears.

How she consoled and petted me! How she assured me I was *everything* to her; the very light of her eyes; her comfort, her blessing—that she could not wish me any different from what I was, and ever so much more in the same strain. It was very sweet, and to a certain extent soothing, but in the end it only deepened the impression. For it

made me feel how utterly unselfish and self-forgetting mamma was above all wherever I was concerned, and it made me feel, too, how little I deserved such devotion.

Then the thought of her cruel trials came over me as it had never done before—how often I had grudged my sympathy to her! Even if she were almost weakly and foolishly indulgent to me, she was scarcely to be blamed. Instead of taking advantage of it and treating her fondness with something very like contempt, as I had often done, would not the right way be to try my best to be more worthy of it? I don't know what put the thought into my head just then. I had a queer feeling that if I had been talking it all over with Yvonne it was what *she* would have said, for it had struck me once or twice that in her way of speaking to and of mamma there

had been a special sort of tenderness, almost reverence, as if she had heard her sad story, and I remembered the anxious, half-reproachful way she had glanced at me when I seemed so indifferent about mamma's walking home alone. Yes, I felt and knew that the sudden thought was one Evey would have approved of, and I grew calmer. I wiped my eyes and kissed mamma as I had seldom done before; a new kind of strength seemed to come into me, and I resolved that from that moment I would care for her in quite a new way.

'Mamma dear,' I whispered, 'you are too good to me. But I will try to be better. Only, will you please let me be more useful to you? I am sure,' I added, and if this was a *very* little cunning, I don't think it was in a naughty way—'I am sure I should be far happier if I felt I were of use.'

And of course mamma promised. What would she not have promised me? I think she told over this conversation to papa; and if any lingering feeling of indignation against Evey had still been in her mind, I am sure what he said must have removed it. For the next morning they were both full of plans for my being a great deal with the Whytes, and of little kindnesses we might do to them, without, as papa said, seeming officious or—he hesitated for a word.

‘Patronising,’ mamma suggested. He smiled at this.

‘My dear,’ he said, ‘*that* we could not possibly be accused of towards the Whytes. You scarcely realise’— But there he stopped. I felt a little ashamed when I recalled one or two of my speeches to Evey.

‘Papa has always such *perfectly* nice feelings,’ I thought; and as I glanced at his kind, quiet face I said to myself that

I might indeed be proud of him. And when he kissed me that morning before he went out, I felt something in his kiss that seemed to say he understood me and my new resolutions better even than mamma did.



CHAPTER VII.

A TRIO OF FRIENDS.

ONE of the hardest things about trying to be good, particularly about trying to be *better*, for that means getting out of bad ways as well as getting into good ones, is the dreadful persistence of bad habits. Even when your heart is quite, *quite* in earnest, and your mind too, and often at the very time you're planning beautifully about keeping your new resolutions, and quite bubbling over with eagerness about them, you get a sudden shock, just as if you had walked straight into a bath of cold water that you didn't know was there—and, oh dear! you stop to find you have done the exact wrong or foolish

thing you had been fixing so to avoid.

How many times this happened to me about the new resolutions I wrote of in the last chapter I should be afraid to say. Sometimes it was almost laughable. One morning I remember I was busy writing down one or two rules I had thought might help me, when I heard mamma's voice calling me.

'Bother!' I said to myself in my old way, 'I shall never remember about the third rule if I leave it just now.' And I went on calmly writing, just calling to mamma, 'Yes, yes, I'll come directly;' and so absorbed was I that when, a full quarter of an hour afterwards, I happened to glance out of the window, and saw mamma hot and out of breath from a chase after my new Persian kitten, who had escaped through the conservatory and might *very* easily have got lost or stolen, or even killed, it

never struck me that I might have saved her this trouble. Trouble on my account, too!

‘What *is* the matter, mamma?’ I exclaimed as I ran out, half-crossly, for I could not bear to see her so tired and breathless. ‘How you do fuss! Why didn’t you make the servants fetch Persica in?’

‘My dear,’ said mamma as gently as if I had any right to find fault with her, ‘you know she won’t come to any one but you or me; and I did call you.’

How ashamed I felt! I tore up the rules, and called them nasty things in my own mind, which was exceedingly silly. Afterwards, when I had more talk with Yvonne and Mary, I made some others. Not half such grand ones. Only very, very simple ones, which I almost despised on that account; but they were useful to me, by showing me that, simple

as they were, it was no easy matter to keep them, even for a few hours at a time.

You see, I had been selfish all my life. I had never even *thought* of its being wrong. Once I did begin to think about it I was perfectly startled and horrified to find how wide-spreading and deep-rooted my selfishness was. I should often have lost heart altogether had it not been for my new friends. Not that they ever 'preached' to me or to anybody; it was just the seeing and *feeling* how different they were, from what a different point of view they looked at everything, that made me understand better where I was wrong, and take courage to go on trying. And now and then nice things happened to make me feel I was getting on a little; some of these I will tell you about, though I have also to tell you of some rather dreadful things that showed how very naughty and horrid—oh, I get

hot still when I think of one of these!—I still was.

It was not only selfishness I had to fight against. I was exceedingly, absurdly, really *vulgarly* self-conceited and stuck-up. I don't think Evey and Mary really ever knew the worst of me. For one thing, I began to *try* almost from the time I first knew them; for another, just as an honest person cannot believe, and never suspects another to be dishonest till he is actually *forced* to do so, the dear Whytes were too sincere and simple and single-minded to understand or take in my ridiculous vanity and affectations.

But I must tell you about my first visit to the Yew Trees—I mean my first visit to its new inhabitants. It was a few days after the Sunday at Lady Honor's. I was fidgeting dreadfully to see Evey again, and I think one of my first real 'tries' at not being selfish was doing my best not to tease mamma

about when we should go, or worry her all day long to fix the exact day and hour.

It was not a very hard 'try,' certainly, for it was only on Wednesday morning that papa told us at breakfast that he had met Captain Whyte the evening before, and had been told by him that Mrs Whyte and the other children had arrived that morning.

'He said,' papa went on, 'that Mrs Whyte would be very pleased to see you, Rose; and when you go to call on her you are to be sure to take Connie.'

'When should we go, do you think?' asked mamma. 'Not to-day—they will hardly be settled enough to see us.'

'I don't know that,' papa replied. 'Captain Whyte said *any* time; the sooner the better. Mrs Whyte may have little things to ask you about; and I fancy they are very methodical, sensible people, who will soon get into order.'

‘They all help so; they’re so useful,’ I could not help saying, with a little sigh.

‘Well, dear,’ said mamma, with an encouraging glance, ‘other little daughters are useful too.—You should have seen how beautifully Connie dusted and rearranged the bookshelves for me yesterday, Tom,’ she went on to papa; for which he gave me one of his nicest smiles.

And it was settled that mamma and I should go that very afternoon.

I felt a little nervous about seeing Mrs Whyte. Somehow the mother of such very well-brought-up children, and a person, too, whom Lady Honor evidently approved of so thoroughly, must, it seemed to me, be rather alarming; and I am not sure but that dear mamma was a little nervous too.

‘We won’t stay long, Connie,’ she said, as we drew near the Yew Trees. ‘Very

likely they are still busy, though they don't mind us. I have been thinking we might ask Evey and her sister to spend an afternoon with you—to-morrow perhaps, or the day after.'

'Yes,' I said, 'I should like that, if their mother can spare them, and if all their time isn't settled out for lessons, and sewing, and taking care of the little ones, like dreadfully good girls in story-books. I'm afraid they're a *little* that way, mamma—very, very regular and punctual, and their mother rather severe and particular. I'll tell you what I'm sure she's like, mamma. Very tall, much taller than you'—and mamma is not little—'and black hair, quite straightly done, and rather small eyes, and a prim way of speaking.'

Mamma began to laugh.

'Hush, Connie!' she said, 'you mustn't upset my gravity. Once I begin laughing'—poor mamma! it wasn't very often she

was really merry, though she tried to seem so for other people's sake—'I can't leave off.'

We were close to the house by this time, though the thick-growing shrubs hid the lower part of it from view, and as mamma spoke sounds of ringing laughter—the most ringing, happy, *pretty* laughter I ever heard—reached our ears, and then voices.

'Joss, Evey, come to my rescue; catch him, the great, silly boy.—No, no, Lancey.' And then, as we came right in front, we saw what it was. A lady, a rather little lady, with dark hair—nice, wavy, dark-brown hair, like what Evey's would have been if it hadn't been so short—and the brightest, sweetest, dark-eyed, rather gipsy-looking face, was running at full speed across the little lawn before the door, with Lancey—the biggest boy of all, you know—after her. She was waving something white, a roll of paper, above

her head, which Lancey was evidently determined to get possession of, and behind him, in every direction it seemed at the first glance, were all the rest of the young Whytes—the three sailor-suits, two girls, Evey and a fair-haired one, and two or three more boys. Such a lot they looked! all rushing about, shouting and laughing at the top of their voices. Suddenly, somebody—Evey, I think—caught sight of us. There came an instant hush.

‘Oh dear,’ were the first words the lady uttered as she hastened up to us, ‘I am so ashamed! You must think me out of my mind, Mrs Percy—it is Mrs Percy?’ with a quick, bright glance of questioning. ‘How good of you to come! We have been hoping you would. And this is Connie?—I am so pleased to see you, dear.’

How charming she was! Not exactly pretty, but so bright and sweet and



All rushing about, shouting and laughing at the top of their voices.

irresistible—prettier than Evey and not as grave, but yet quite like enough to be her mother.

‘You must think me a terrible tomboy,’ she said, laughing again, and blushing a very little. ‘But we are in such spirits. It’s so long since we’ve been all together like this, for the big boys only came from school last week, and’——

‘Mother is rather a tomboy,’ said Lancelot coolly. ‘I think Mrs Percy had best understand the truth from the first, and then she will never be shocked at our goings on.’

‘You impertinent boy!’ said his mother, laughing up at him. He was a great deal taller than she. ‘You shouldn’t waste your time in writing verses, instead of doing your lessons.—Should he, Mrs Percy?’

This hint silenced Lancey effectually. And soon all the children dispersed, and Mrs Whyte took mamma away into the

house. Only Yvonne and the fair-haired girl, who, I knew, must of course be Mary, stayed with me. I had not yet spoken—I had felt so completely bewildered by the contrast between the real Mrs Whyte and the fancy picture I had been drawing of her just the moment before that no words came to my lips.

Yvonne thought that I was feeling shy, I suppose, and to put me at my ease she drew forward her sister.

‘This is “plain Mary,” Connie,’ she said. ‘I see I must introduce you formally. Doesn’t she suit her name?’ she added, and I could hear in her tone how proud she was of Mary.

No wonder. Mary was so pretty. She was very, very fair—and she seemed even fairer beside her rather gipsy-like mother and sister. But she had dark eyes, much darker than mine; I am not speaking of myself out of conceit, truly, but because

I know that fair hair and dark eyes are thought pretty, as mamma has often praised mine, and Mary's hair is fairer and her eyes darker than mine, and she has a very sweet expression—what is called an 'appealing' expression, I think. She stood there glancing up at Evey in a little timid way, as if accustomed to be protected and directed by her, that I did think so sweet. I had not one atom of jealousy—I am so glad I hadn't—in my thoughts as I looked at her, even though there was a *sort* of likeness between her and me that might have made me feel jealous of her being so much prettier. But, then, this particular kind of envy has not been my temptation; so it wasn't any goodness in me not to feel it. I just stood looking at Mary with a real nice pleasure in her sweetness. And she looked at me with a shy smile in her eyes; and Yvonne looked at us both for a moment in silence, then she

gave a sort of jump and clapped her hands.

‘Connie,’ she said, ‘I knew there was something that made me feel sure I’d love you at once. Do you know you and Mary are really rather like each other? I wonder if the others have seen it?’

I felt myself get rosy with pleasure.

‘Are we really?’ I said. ‘I am so glad.’

And sweet Mary grew red too when I said that.

‘I’m very glad you’re glad,’ she said shyly. ‘Of course *I* would like to be like you.’

And I think that afternoon sealed our friendship. How happy we were! We explored all the garden together, making plans for all sorts of nice things: out-of-door teas, games of hide-and-seek, gardening and flower-shows (I will tell you about our flower-shows some other time—they were such fun), when the summer came; then we went into the house and

explored it too, spending most of our time in the girls' room, the room with the rose-paper, where the two little white beds were standing side by side and everything was as neat as could be; though to my eyes, accustomed to much more luxury, it looked rather bare. But Evey was full of her plans for dressing-up the toilet-table and adorning the windows with blinds and ribbons to match.

'I've been waiting for you to come to talk about it with us,' she said.—'Connie has such good taste,' she went on to Mary; 'you know she chose this paper.'

And though I had always fancied, and had even, I fear, been rather proud of saying, that I hated needlework, I found myself undertaking a share in it all quite cheerfully.

'You'll join our poor-work, won't you, Connie?' said Evey; 'unless, of course, you've got a club of your own already.'

And when I stared, she went on to

explain that, busy as they were, busier still as their mother was, they all gave a certain amount of time regularly every week to sewing for the poor.

‘You wouldn’t believe how much one can do if one keeps to it,’ said Evey. ‘And you know things that are neatly made are so much more good to poor people than what one can buy. Once we had quite a proper club, and twice a year we had a shop—it was such fun. Mother says it is best to let them buy the things when they can, though we always gave away *some*. I wonder if we can have a club here?’

‘There is a sort of one, I think,’ I said. ‘Anna Gale and her aunt manage it. But I’m sure it is stupidly done. They are so dull and stupid about everything.’

Evey glanced up quickly.

‘Mother is so clever about things like that,’ she said. ‘Perhaps something might be done about it. I dare say she would

talk about it to Miss Gale. There are a good many new ideas about such things now, and perhaps—perhaps it is a little old-fashioned here, and mother might improve it. I think Anna Gale must be a very good girl.'

'Oh yes,' I said contemptuously; 'she's *good* enough.'

Again Evey's quick little glance. I didn't quite like it.

'Evey,' I said, 'you needn't look at me that way. I know it's wrong to say unkind things of people, but when any one *is* very dull and stupid you can't say she's interesting and clever.'

'I don't think you needed to say anything. I wasn't asking you about what the Gales were,' said Evey, in her rather blunt way. 'I don't mean to be rude or to lay down the law, Connie; only'—

'Mother says,' Mary interrupted in her shy way—'mother says it is always so very easy to find fault and to see the

worst of people. It takes much more cleverness trying to see the best of them.'

I had begun to feel rather angry, but Mary's words made me think a little.

'Well,' I said, 'I dare say that's true. But I don't like Anna Gale, I suppose, and I dare say I've never tried to. Do you think that's wrong? You can't like everybody the same.'

'No,' said Evey, 'not the same. That's just the difference. But there's *something* to like in nearly everybody. And I think we should try to see that part of them most. But, *of course*, you don't need to like everybody the same; that would do away with friends and friendship. One thing I do like you for, Connie, is that you're frank and honest.'

I smiled.

'Well, then, try to think most of that part of me,' I said, repeating her own words. 'No; I'd like you to see the bad

parts of me too, and help me to be better.'

Evey opened wide her bright brown eyes, and for once she got a little red.

'My dear Connie,' she said, 'I'm far too full of bad things myself to be able to make any one else better.' And I saw she quite meant it.

A nice little thing happened that afternoon, as we were leaving, which was great encouragement to me. It had grown rather chilly, and at the door I was helping mamma on with some extra wraps we had brought.

'You mustn't catch cold, mamma dear,' I said.

We thought we were alone, but just then Evey ran out again with some forgotten message to mamma, and as they two were speaking I heard voices just behind the inner door.

'I like to see how gentle and tender Connie Percy is to her mother,' one said

—it was Mrs Whyte's. 'I might have been sure any girl Lady Honor liked would be *that*.'

Where were all my unworthy fears that Lady Honor had spoken 'against me' to the Whytes?



CHAPTER VIII.

FOUND WANTING.

THAT winter and spring and summer, and the winter that followed them too, were—happy as my life had been in many ways—the happiest I had ever known. I was not, of course, constantly with the Whytes, for we had our lessons separately, and they had a great many other things to do beside lessons, things which it had never entered my head that a little girl could help in, though once I made a start I found that this had been quite a mistake.

I have marked down a few special days to write about; for, looking back upon your life after a few years, you can see what were the really important things that happened, the events which were

the first links in a chain that led to lasting effects—little and trifling as these events may have seemed at the time.

Yvonne's birthday was in November. Not a very nice month for a birthday, one might think. But, as I have said before, November in our part of the world is often very nice. *Some* days in it are sure to be so, and of course we made up our minds that *the* day could not but be one of the nicest.

'I have always been sorry my birthday was in November,' said Evey one afternoon, a week or two before the important date; 'but Connie has almost made me change my mind.'

'I think it rather suits you,' I said. 'You wouldn't seem in your place on a very hot, lazy, full-summer day, when one *can't* be active and energetic and useful: the sort of day when you feel you *may* be idle and of no use for once;' and I gave a little sigh. They all laughed.



We were at tea in my schoolroom.

‘Poor Connie!’ said Mary, ‘Evey has bullied you out of your nice, comfortable, lazy ways rather too much, hasn’t she? Well, I’ll tell you what; when *your* birthday comes you shall stay in bed and we’ll all come and pay you a visit.’

They were paying me a visit that day. We were at tea in my schoolroom. I was making the tea—pouring it out, I mean—and mamma, who had come in to see how we were getting on, was sitting knitting in the window, where Evey had just carried her a cup. Two of the boys were with us: Addie, whom they always tried to get any treat for, as he was kept out of so many boys’ pleasures; and Charley, the next in age to him. Lancelot and Jocelyn did not often honour us with their society; they were working very hard now at their particular studies.

Mamma looked up at this speech of Mary’s, and said quickly:

‘I am sure that way of spending her

birthday would not be at all to Connie's taste. She has *never* been lazy, though of course in a large family there are a great many things to do that it would be absurd to spend time over where there is only one child and plenty of servants.'

I felt a little vexed. Mamma need not have started up in my defence, and *I* knew that, even if I had never been actually lazy, I had, before I began to think about such things, been often very, very *idle*. I could tell by mamma's tone that she was annoyed, though she spoke, as usual, quite gently. I could see, too, that Yvonne and Mary felt it; but then they were so simple and downright that they never took things in a hurt, *self* sort of way. Mary's face shadowed over a little; she was just sorry to have vexed mamma, and ready to blame herself.

'Oh, dear Mrs Percy!' she exclaimed, '*please* don't think I was in earnest. It would have been very unkind and—im—

pertinent. Do you know, we often say Connie is the most active of us all, and it's all the more credit to her, for she doesn't *need* to be, like us. You couldn't fancy one of us ever able to sit with our hands before us doing nothing—up at the Yew Trees. Now, could you?’

And she broke into a merry, sweet little laugh, for, indeed, the idea of any one at the Yew Trees indulging in much *dolce far niente* was rather comical. They had only two servants and the odd man for all there was to do, and yet everything was nice and comfortably done, and there was never any ‘fussing,’ which *is* so disagreeable.

The laugh made Mary's peace.

‘It is all right, my dear,’ said mamma kindly. ‘I dare say I take up things mistakenly sometimes,’ she added. ‘You must forgive me; I fear I lost some of my capacity for fun long ago.’

She spoke in the rather touching way

she sometimes, but rarely, did, when one could see she was thinking of that sad long ago time. Yvonne and Mary glanced at each other, and then at her half-wistfully. They knew the story, of course; and even if mamma had been cross and disagreeable, I don't believe they would ever have found it in their hearts to blame her. Still, there was no doubt mamma had never taken to Mary in the same way as to Evey. It was partly, I think, because of the name—'Evey,' I mean, which mamma loved so—and partly—now I *hope* it is not wrong or disrespectful of me to say this—that Mary was like me, only *much* prettier, and I am afraid poor little darling mamma was a tiny atom jealous *for* me.

However, it was all smoothed down now about Mary's little speech, and the boys' talk soon took away any feeling of constraint.

'The worst of a birthday so near Christ-

mas,' said Charley thoughtfully, 'is that it muddles the presents. Either you feel as if you'd got too much, or else people give you less than if Christmas wasn't coming, and that isn't fair.'

'It doesn't matter so much now we've made a new rule,' said Addie. 'We all give birthday presents to each other, but at Christmas we only give them to father and mother, and they give to us. It's a good plan.'

'Yes,' said Mary, 'there are so many of us, you see, that the lots of Christmas presents were really dreadful.'

You might think from this that the Whytes were very rich; but if you had seen the simple presents they gave each other! Yet they weren't silly or rubbishing, though as often as not home-made, and if not home-made, useful and practical, like gloves or neckties, the kind of presents *I*, I am afraid, would rather have despised. I once heard a rather spoilt

little girl call such things 'at any rate presents,' meaning that she would have got them *anyway*. But new gloves and so on were too rare among my friends for them to be looked on in this way.

'Mother made another rule,' said Charley, who was rather a chatterbox; 'at least it wasn't a settled rule—it was one we might keep or not and nobody need know—it was about birthdays, for everybody on their birthday to promise themselves that they'd do something kind to somebody—I mean something *extra*, you know, like Addie writing a long letter to old nurse, which is rather a bore. But he did it.'

Addie grew red.

'And,' pursued the irrepressible Charley, 'I *think* I know what Evey's fixed for her private birthday treat—that's what we call it.—I couldn't help hearing, Evey; your door was wide open when you were telling Mary.—She's going to ask An'—

‘Charley, *hush!*’ cried Evey, for once almost cross. ‘If you couldn’t help hearing you could help telling it over. And I hadn’t settled—I haven’t yet.’

‘If it’s anything about Anna Gale, I just hope you haven’t settled,’ I said *very* crossly. ‘At least I hope you won’t go and do anything that will spoil your birthday for other people.’

Yvonne did not answer, but Mary began talking rather eagerly about a new game we were going to try, and for the time I forgot about Anna Gale.

I was very anxious and important about *my* present to Evey. I had plenty of pocket-money, and I would have loved to give Evey something *very* nice. But mamma—I rather think it was papa who put it into her head to say so to me—told me that she did not think it would do to give Yvonne anything very expensive. It might rather annoy the Whytes instead of pleasing them. I felt very dis-

appointed at first, till mamma reminded me that if my real wish was to give pleasure to Evey, I should not risk mingling anything uncomfortable with it.

‘That would be selfish,’ she said, ‘pleasing yourself instead of her;’ and I saw that that was true.

Indeed, everything in this world that is worth anything seems mixed up with self-denial! The longer one lives the more one sees this. I suppose it is *meant* to be so.

There did seem rather more self-denial than need have been about Evey’s birthday. I don’t think so *now*; it was my own fault that things went wrong. If I had been different about it lots of going wrong would have been avoided; but I must tell it all straight on as well as I can, and as nearly as it happened.

Two or three days before the birthday, Evey came to me looking rather grave.

‘Connie,’ she said, ‘I’ve something to

tell you which I'm afraid will vex you rather. It's about my birthday. You remember what Charley said the other day?'

'About doing something nice for other people on your birthday?' I said. 'Oh, you needn't tell me anything more, Evey. I know what it is; you're going to ask that horrid Anna Gale. Well, I must say I don't see that you've any right to spoil *other* people's pleasure, whatever you choose to do about your own. That is a queer sort of self-sacrifice.'

Yvonne looked very distressed. I had never seen her bright face so troubled before.

'Connie,' she said, 'you do make me feel so unhappy, and rather puzzled. I wonder if really I have been selfish when I was so wanting to be unselfish. But it can't be helped now. I'm not *going* to ask Anna, because I *have* asked her.'

Poor Evey! she got red and blurted it

out. I think she was a little afraid of me. I was very angry, and I fear something mean in me made me get still more so when I saw that she was frightened.

‘Upon my word,’ I said, ‘you’re a queer sort of friend! If it *had* to be done, you might at least have told me about it, and given me the chance of being self-denying too; it wouldn’t have seemed *quite* so bad then. But to be forced into joining in a horrid thing and not to get any credit for it, I don’t think *that’s* fair. I won’t come to your birthday, Evey—that’ll be the best way out of it; and if you do care for me, as you make out, that’ll be a little more self-denial, as you’re so fond of it.’

Evey looked on the point of crying, and she very seldom cried.

‘Oh Connie!’ she said, ‘you *can’t* be in earnest.’ But that was all.

I only saw her once again before the birthday, and that was after church on Sunday, when Mary came running after

mamma and me—we were walking home rather quickly—to say that Evey had sent her to remind me not on any account to be later than three o'clock on Tuesday afternoon. Tuesday was *the* day.

‘Certainly, dear,’ mamma replied, as I hesitated a little, ‘Connie will be in good time. If it is a wet day she must have a fly, for our pony—the one we drive—has got a cold, unluckily.’

‘But it’s not going to be a rainy day,’ said Mary brightly. ‘It’s going to be lovely.—So, if it’s fine, Connie, do walk, and we’ll meet you. I hope the field-path won’t be too muddy with the rain last week.’

And off she flew again before I had time to say anything. But mamma looked at me inquiringly.

‘Is there anything the matter, darling?’ she said anxiously. I had not told her about Anna; I was ashamed of myself in my heart.

'*Everything's* the matter,' I said, shaking myself crossly. And then I told her. Mamma was sorry for me, and sorry about the thing itself.

'I do think Evey might have'— she began, but then she stopped. Her conscience would not let her say more. It was so very clear a case of right and wrong, of selfishness and unselfishness. For she knew, and I knew, that it was not often the Whytes could afford any sort of 'treat.' They lived very simply and plainly, and the cakes for the birthday were thought of a long time before. They were glad to ask Anna to an entertainment which would really please her and her friends, much more than being invited to tea with them quite in an everyday way.

'Dear Connie,' mamma went on, 'you must try to be self-denying too. After all, I dare say Anna won't interfere much with your amusement.'

‘Yes, she will,’ I said, kicking the pebbles on the road; ‘she’ll quite spoil it. And then she’ll go telling everybody—all Miss Parker’s girls that she’s such friends with—about having been at the Yew Trees for Evey’s birthday. It’ll make it seem so *common*.’

‘You can anyway go early,’ said mamma, ‘and be there with your friends before she comes. Then you can give your present by yourself. I don’t suppose Anna will have a present, so it is better on all accounts for you to give yours alone.’

This smoothed me down a little. Then the interest of the present itself was very great. It was a very pretty little silver brooch, made of the letters ‘C’ and ‘Y’ twisted together, and in those days monogram brooches were not yet common. It had been made to order, of course, and though it looked simple it had really cost a good deal. Still, there was nothing

about it to make the Whytes feel as if it were too handsome. By Tuesday morning, especially when the day proved clear and fine—one of our very sweetest November days—I had pretty well recovered my good temper, and was prepared to make myself agreeable. But I had not really struggled against my selfishness—I had just got tired of being cross, and let my ill-humour drop off—so I was not at all in a firm state of mind for resisting any new trial.

And the trial came.

It came that very morning about twelve o'clock, and it was brought by the 'boy' from the Vicarage, in the shape of a note to mamma, from Miss Gale, senior—that is Anna's aunt—asking if her niece might call for me on her way to the Yew Trees that afternoon, and walk there with me, as it was not convenient to send a maid with her. There was no question of its being much of a favour on my side. Old

Miss Gale, as I called her, seemed quite comfortably assured that it would be a pleasant arrangement for all parties. I was with mamma when the note came; I saw there was something wrong, and I insisted upon her telling me what it was. I listened in silence. Then I broke out:

‘I *won't* go with her; I say I *won't*,’ I exclaimed loudly. ‘You may just write and say so, mamma.’

But at that moment papa put his head in at the door. I had not known that he was in the house.

‘What is all this?’ he said, and his face and his voice were as I had never seen or heard them before. Mamma explained, as gently as she could of course, and so as to throw the least possible blame on me.

‘It is rather trying for Connie, you see, Tom,’ she finished up.

‘And does Connie expect never to be tried?’ he answered sternly.—‘Why are you to be exempt from the common lot?’

he went on, turning to me. 'Where is your principle, your boasted superiority? Yes, child, you may not exactly say so in words, but you *do* think yourself superior to others,' he went on, seeing that I was about to interrupt him, 'if at the very first little contradiction you are to lose your temper and forget yourself so shamefully. You have no right to feel it a contradiction even; it is only proper and natural that Anna should sometimes share your pleasures.'

'Then I won't go,' I said sulkily; 'I will stay at home. Anna may have the Whytes all to herself.'

Papa looked at me. It was like the waiting for the thunderclap one knows must come.

'If you do not go, and, what is more, behave like a lady, I shall tell the reason in plain words to Captain and Mrs Whyte, and leave them to judge if you are a fitting associate for their children.'

I said nothing more. I knew I must give in. I had met with my master! Mamma was nearly crying by this time; but I was not the least sorry for her, I was only angry. I turned and left the room, saying as I did so, in a cool, hard voice that I hardly recognised as my own:

‘Very well. I will be ready in time.’



CHAPTER IX.

THE STRANGE OLD WOMAN.

IT was a good thing for Anna's own comfort that afternoon that she was not of a very observant nature, otherwise she would certainly not have found me either a pleasant or courteous companion. I was obliged to obey papa, and I dared not be positively rude to her; but beyond this I was determined not to go. The very feeling of having been forced to give in made me the more bitter and the more inclined to resent my grievances on her, the innocent cause of them. But Anna had never been accustomed to overmuch civility from me; even as quite little children I had treated her as if it did not matter *how* she was

treated. And she only smiled placidly at my vagaries, and doubtless said to herself that 'poor little Connie was very spoilt.'

We had seen each other very rarely of late, and then generally with the Whytes, so I don't think it struck Anna as at all strange that I walked on beside her in grim silence, scarcely even condescending to notice her few amiable commonplace remarks. Poor child! her head was always full of home cares; I think it must have been a treat to her even to walk along quietly without a lot of 'little ones' tugging at her skirt.

'It is a nice day,' she observed for about the fifth time. 'The boys have gone to Belton Woods. I hope aunt won't let Prissy go with them, however; she is sure to catch cold if they stay late. November evenings are so chilly.'

'I should think you'd be rather glad for some of them to catch cold some-

times,' I said. 'It must be a blessing to have a few quiet in bed.'

Anna stared at me; then a smile broke over her rather dull face.

'How funny you are, Connie!' she said. 'No, I think they're quite as noisy in bed as anywhere else, except when they're really very ill, and that, of course, is no laughing matter. But they're all well just now, and really to-day is like September: it is a nice day.'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'It's one of our nicest autumn days. If—if only some things were different,' I added to myself.

We were by this time in the lane, which, after crossing the fields, was the nearest way to the Yew Trees. This lane ran into the high-road too, so any one coming to the Whytes' *had* to go some way along it. Just as I spoke—we had climbed over a stile into the lane—I saw coming towards us, as if going to the Yew Trees from the road, a very curious

figure. It was that of a small old woman. She seemed a little lame, yet she walked pretty fast. But I did not like her look at all; indeed, as she came nearer and I saw that her face was almost hidden by a lace veil of a very heavy pattern, and that she had a wig of very black and shiny curls falling on each side of her cheeks, I felt almost frightened, I scarcely knew why. She had a long cloak of rusty black silk, and a queer brown fur 'pelerine'—I think that is the old-fashioned name for such things. And she seemed to have sprung up so suddenly that I almost felt as if I was *fancying* her. For the first time that afternoon I turned to Anna with a sort of friendliness.

'Anna,' I said, 'do look. Who can that queer woman be?'

'A tramp,' Anna began to say. We were used to tramps of all kinds, but still this description hardly suited the person now closely approaching us. A

thought crossed my mind—could it be one of the Whyte boys dressed up to frighten us? But no; they never played such tricks.

‘It must be one of those tiresome old things from the Marley almshouses,’ I said. Marley was a village about five miles off. ‘I know how they pester papa. He is far too good to them. Very likely she thinks the Whytes are new-comers, and that she’ll get something out of them.’

And no longer frightened, but rather disgusted, I prepared to walk on, when suddenly a sharp, almost imperious, voice bade me stop.

‘Please to tell me if this is the way to the Yew Trees,’ it said. ‘The Yew Trees—a cottage where Captain Whyte has come to live. Don’t you hear me, child—can’t you speak?’ For I had been at first too startled to answer; and then, as I took in the meaning of the old woman’s words,

I grew angry. What right had she to call the Yew Trees—mamma's own old house, which would be *my* house some day—'a cottage'? And what business had she to speak to me so sharply—'child,' indeed!—a dirty old tramp, or, worse, a cheat, a begging-letter impostor, or something of that kind, to speak to *me* so? For she was addressing me and not Anna, who was a little behind me.

'I don't see that I am obliged to answer every beggar in the road who may happen to speak to me,' I said, very rudely, I must confess. For, queer as she was, the old woman was plainly not a common beggar.

She came closer.

'Beggar,' she repeated—'beggar, indeed!' Then she gave a horrid, mocking little laugh. But suddenly she controlled herself again. 'Be so good as to tell me where Captain Whyte's cottage is.'

'It isn't a cottage. It's a large house,'

I said. 'I should know, considering it's mine, or as good as mine.'

She started a little, then eyed me curiously.

'Oh!' she exclaimed. 'I might have guessed it. Then you are one of the Whyte children; let me see—not the eldest?'

'No, I'm not the eldest. But I don't see what business it is of yours who I am. Let me go'—for she had laid her hand—it was covered with an old black kid glove much too large for her—on my sleeve; 'let me go,' I said, as I felt her holding me more firmly. 'You may save yourself the trouble of going on to the Yew Trees. Captain Whyte and Mrs Whyte wouldn't speak to you.'

'Indeed,' she said with a sneer, 'I can quite believe it, to judge by their daughter's pretty manners to a poor, tired old woman. I could not have believed it of—— He was proud, but you are



‘Have they never taught you to show respect to age, young lady?’

insolent, I can tell you. It's as well, perhaps; but I wish I hadn't met you, with your fair hair and pretty eyes, just like—— Have they never taught you to show respect to age, young lady? I suppose you think yourself a lady?'

'*You* are insolent,' I said, stamping my foot in fury. 'How dare you? Get away, you dirty old tramp, or I'll send for the police.'

But at that moment, while the old woman positively glared at me through her veil, Anna, who had not yet spoken, came close and whispered something in my ear. 'I dare say she's insane,' Anna said; 'you know there's an asylum at Wichthorpe. She may have escaped. You should never provoke mad people, Connie.'

And she turned to the stranger and spoke to her gently.

'I think you would get any information you want in Elmwood better than

here,' she said. 'Captain and Mrs Whyte have not been here so very long. And—and I think they're rather busy to-day.'

The old woman turned to her. She looked at Anna for a moment or two without speaking.

'Thank you,' she said. 'I have changed my mind. I have no wish to pay the Whyte family a visit. I—I think I've had enough of them. And who are you, pray?' she went on. 'You have a civil tongue in your head at least.'

'I'm—my father's the vicar of Elmwood,' said Anna, very frightened, but not daring not to reply. 'He's Mr Gale—if you want anything I dare say he could help you. You could ask for the Vicarage.'

'No, thank you; but I'm obliged. Yes, I'm obliged to you,' said the queer creature. Then she turned and walked rapidly back the way she had come. We lost sight of her, of course, when she

turned into the road; but a moment or two afterwards we heard wheels, and, looking right on to the end of the lane, we saw a fly drive rapidly past. We looked at each other.

‘Dear me!’ said Anna, ‘it’s just as if the fly had been waiting for her.’

‘Nonsense,’ I said roughly; ‘an old beggar like that!’

‘I don’t think she was exactly a beggar,’ said Anna. Nor did I, at the bottom of my heart.

‘Then she was mad, as you said yourself,’ I rejoined. ‘But listen, Anna; don’t tell them about her at the Yew Trees. I don’t want Yvonne’s birthday spoilt any more. Do you hear, Anna?—you’re not to tell.’

Anna hesitated. ‘I don’t see that it would spoil the birthday,’ she said; ‘and perhaps’—

‘It would spoil it to *me*,’ I said, ‘if you care about that. Of course you’d tell

them I was rude to the old woman, and they'd be all down upon me. I don't deny I was rude; I've been too vexed by other things to be in a good temper.'

'I'm so sorry,' said Anna, her kind heart at once touched. 'No, I won't say anything about it, then. The only thing was—are you sure it isn't anything that matters? Suppose she really had some message for Captain or Mrs Whyte?'

'We didn't stop her going on if she had. At least I only told her they wouldn't be bothered with her, and you said they were busy to-day. That wouldn't have stopped her if it was anything real.'

'N—no, I suppose not,' said Anna. She was very slow at seeing things, and I could generally overrule her, in the first place, anyway. So, though she was plainly not quite satisfied, she gave in.

I felt a little conscience-stricken myself, to own the truth. I knew I had behaved



Evey was very pleased with the monogram brooch.

inexcusably to the strange old woman, and the consciousness of this made me gentler and more conciliatory, so to speak, than I might otherwise have been. So the birthday party went off peacefully, and on the whole pleasantly, though somehow not as merrily and cheerily as was usual with the Whytes' simple festivities. Evey was very pleased with the monogram brooch—so pleased that I could afford not to feel jealous when she warmly thanked Anna for her present of a neat and well-made, but extraordinarily ugly, toilet-pincushion. And I was able heartily to admire the other presents, all from her own family, and mostly of home manufacture.

'Evey's *best* present hasn't come yet,' said Mary. 'It's a post late somehow.'

'It's sure to come this evening,' said Evey hopefully. 'Papa's going to walk in to the post-office to see; you know we don't get afternoon letters unless we

send for them. And there's sure to be a letter too; indeed, that's almost what we care most for.'

'But what *is* the present?' I asked curiously. 'Whom is it from? And is it always the same thing? And why do you care so for a stupid letter?'

Yvonne hesitated. She and Mary looked at each other.

'I am sure you may tell Connie,' said innocent Mary.

'Well,' said Evey, 'I can tell part anyway. The present, that we call my best present,' she went on, 'comes from my godmother, papa's aunt. It isn't always the same, but it's always something very nice and useful. Last year it was two muffs and four pairs of gloves, for me to do what I liked with; so of course I gave one muff and two pairs of gloves—we take the same size, you know—to Mary. And this year we were half-hoping it *might* be jackets.'

‘What stupid presents!’ I said. ‘I don’t care a bit for *clothes* presents.’

‘But then you’re different; things are quite different for you, Connie,’ said Evey.

‘I know,’ I replied, with self-satisfaction. ‘But if it was jackets, Evey, they couldn’t come by post.’

It was before the days of parcel-post.

‘No; but the letter telling of them would be coming. And it *mightn’t* be jackets.’

‘Why do you care so for the letter?’ I asked.

‘Oh, because it pleases papa and mamma so. Papa hasn’t seen her for ever so long, though she almost brought him up—but—there were things—— I don’t think I can tell you any more,’ she broke off, and of course I could not ask any more questions after that. But I had a vaguely uneasy and anxious feeling, especially a little later in the evening, when Captain Whyte returned dispirited and tired.

‘It’s beginning to rain,’ he said. ‘Evey dear, your birthday is not ending as brightly as it began; however’——

‘There was no letter?’ said Mrs Whyte.
He shook his head.

‘It may come to-morrow morning still,’ he replied. But I saw that they all seemed disappointed.

Anna Gale and I went home as we had come, with the addition of Peters, our old gardener, as escort. It had left off raining again, and there was some faint moonlight struggling through the clouds. Mamma had meant to send the brougham; but papa had been suddenly summoned to a distance, and as the evening was fine after all she thought we might walk, by the road of course. As we got to the end of the lane the scene of that afternoon came back to our minds. I did not want to think of it, but Anna would speak about it.

‘I wonder,’ she said—fancy Anna ‘won-

dering' about anything!—'I really *wonder* who she was.'

'Oh, rubbish!' I said. 'Who could she be but some old lunatic?'

'Well,' said Anna, 'if she were, it isn't very nice to think of.'

I faced round upon her.

'Now, Anna, you're not to go talking about it, for I know it would sound as if I had been horrid to her, and perhaps I was; I don't pretend to be an angel. But I don't want any fuss—do you hear, Anna?'

'Yes,' she said, 'of course I hear you, Connie.'

'Well, then, will you promise?'

'I'll promise not to speak about it if I can help it,' she said; and with that I had to be content.

I don't quite know why I was so anxious that no one should hear of our adventure. I was not, after all, so *very* ashamed of my behaviour to the old

woman; not as ashamed as I should have been. But I had an uncomfortable, uneasy feeling—I just wanted to forget all about it.

I did not see Yvonne and Mary for some days after that; the next morning was showery, though it cleared up between times. But after that the rain set in, and we had a week or two of almost constant downpour, which interfered very much with our usual ways. They came to spend an afternoon with me at last. Mamma arranged that the carriage should both fetch them and take them back, for the roads were really sopping, though the rain overhead was less incessant. We were very glad to be together again. Evey wore my little brooch; it reminded me of her birthday.

‘Oh, by-the-bye,’ I said to her, ‘did your jackets, or whatever it was, come the next day?’

A cloud came over their bright faces.

‘No,’ said Evey, ‘nothing came—and no letter. We were very disappointed.’

‘Perhaps something will come at Christmas instead,’ said Mary hopefully.

‘You greedy little thing,’ I said thoughtlessly. ‘I wonder you care, especially if it was something to wear.’

‘You—you don’t quite understand, Connie,’ said Mary, her eyes filling with tears; ‘there was no letter, and father and mother mind *that*.’

‘Letters are often lost in the post. Why don’t you write to the old lady’—what was it that gave me a queer thrill as I said the words?—‘and ask if there is anything the matter?’ I said, meaning in a clumsy way to suggest some comfort.

‘We can’t,’ said Yvonne in a low voice.

But they explained no more, and I was not sorry. I did not want to spoil our afternoon by disagreeable subjects.

Christmas came. The day after, there

was a large gathering at Lady Honor's, as there had been the year before. Captain and Mrs Whyte would not leave their own home on Christmas Day itself, as they did not like to separate from any of the little ones; but Mr Bickersteth was not satisfied without a Christmas party, so it was arranged to have it on the 26th. A good many Whytes came—all, down to the three youngest, I think. Papa and mamma and I were of the party too. Mr and Miss Gale, Anna and her two brothers from school, and two or three people staying with Lady Honor. It was a very nice party, and everything was done to make it so; but somehow it was not quite so merry as it should have been. Mrs Whyte, who was generally the life of everything, looked tired, and owned to a headache for once; Captain Whyte was very silent, and the boys and girls were rather subdued.

In the course of the evening, during

some of the games, I happened to be standing near Lady Honor and Captain Whyte, and I could not avoid hearing what they said.

‘Did you know, Frank,’ asked Lady Honor, ‘that Hugo is expected back next week?’

He started.

‘No, indeed,’ he said. ‘I had no idea of it.’

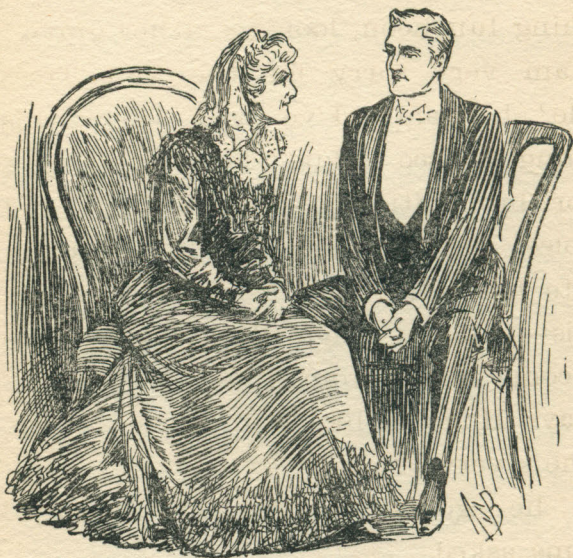
‘I only heard it this morning,’ she went on, ‘in a letter from’—— I did not catch the name. ‘He is not well—— coming on sick leave, straight to—your aunt’s.’

Captain Whyte looked grave. Still, there was a touch of something not altogether regret in his voice as he answered:

‘I am very sorry—very. But, oh! I should be glad to see him again; and, selfishly speaking, just now’—— He hesitated and glanced round. At that moment

I was called for in the game, and I ran off and heard no more.

'I wonder who "Hugo" is,' I thought, 'and if his aunt is the Whytes' jacket-aunt too!'



CHAPTER X.

THE LOOK ON PAPA'S FACE.

A WEEK or two after, papa came in one day just as mamma and I were finishing luncheon, looking rather grave.

'I am very sorry for the Yew Trees people,' he said; 'I've been there this morning to see Addie. I'm afraid he's in for bronchitis, poor little chap, and troubles never come singly. Captain Whyte has heard that a favourite cousin of his—a Major Hugo Whyte, who has just come home from India—is very ill. He says Hugo is like a brother to him, and he's very cut up.'

'Is he going to see his cousin?' mamma asked.

'N—no; there seem other difficulties, family complications. He was going to

tell me more, but we were interrupted. Lady Honor sent for Captain Whyte in a hurry. I hope there's nothing wrong there. I don't know what's coming to everybody.' Papa, usually so cheerful, looked rather depressed. 'The Whytes have some money-bothers, too, I fear.'

'Evey and Mary haven't got any new winter jackets,' I said. 'They're still wearing their tweed ones, with knitted vests underneath. The old lady can't have sent them any Christmas present.'

Papa glanced at me in surprise.

'What old lady? You seem to know a great deal about our neighbours' affairs, Miss Connie.'

'No,' I said; 'I don't know much. Only, it's an old lady who's Evey's god-mother, and she generally sends her birthday presents, and she didn't this year.'

Papa looked grave.

'I wonder,' he said, consideringly, 'if that is what's wrong. Whyte has an aunt, I know, who almost brought him up. I have heard Lady Honor speak of her as very eccentric. Perhaps—but I mustn't gossip about my friends' concerns,' he added more lightly; 'though truly, in this case, it is real interest in them that makes me do so.'

'I am sure no one could ever accuse *you* of gossiping, Tom,' said mamma in a funny little way she had of bristling up in papa's or my defence.

'No one has done so, my dear, except my own self. *Qui s'excuse s'accuse*, you know.'

And whistling in a boyish way, as he sometimes did, papa started off on his hard day's work again, stopping to give me a kiss on my forehead as he passed me.

I have always remembered that morn-

ing, because of what came afterwards: it was so miserable.

It was about three o'clock only; I was still at my lessons with my governess in the schoolroom. I had no idea of seeing papa again till perhaps late in the evening, for he was very busy just then; there was so much illness about. Still, I was not exactly startled when I heard his voice in the hall, calling me. He did sometimes look in for a moment as he was passing, now and then, to give some directions at the surgery, or to fetch a book for himself if he were going to drive far.

'Connie,' I heard—'Connie, I want you at once!'

'Run, Connie,' said Miss Wade, my governess, for I was delaying a moment to finish a line—a bad habit of mine was want of prompt obedience. 'Run at once; Dr Percy has no time to spare.'

She spoke rather sharply, and I got up.

'Yes, papa,' I said as I opened the door, rather affecting deliberateness till out of Miss Wade's sight. (I have told you that I had been 'going back' lately in several ways.) 'Yes, papa, I am here.'

I moved quickly once I got into the hall. Papa was standing there, booted and spurred—how nice and big and manly he looked!—for he had been riding. But his face had a strange expression; he looked stern and yet upset. Under his rather sunburnt, bronzed complexion, I could see an unusual flush of excitement.

'Is anything the matter?' I asked, startled, I scarcely knew why. 'Addie Whyte isn't worse?'

'No, no, nothing like that. But I want you at once, Connie'—he had begun to speak rather impatiently, but his tone

softened as he saw that I looked frightened. 'You needn't look so terrified, my dear. It is nothing—only—only a little misapprehension which you will be able to set right at once. I want you to come with me to Lady Honor's. I have ordered the carriage; it will be round in an instant. Run and put your things on—something warm; it is very cold.'

'But, papa,' I began, 'won't you tell'—

'No, my dear, I can't explain. You will see for yourself that it is better not. I will tell Miss Wade that you cannot have any more lessons this afternoon, and I have already told mamma that I want you. Be quick, dear.'

In five minutes I was seated beside papa in the brougham. He drew the soft, warm fur rug over me tenderly, and put his arm round me.

'Why are you trembling so, Connie?' he said. 'You have done nothing

wrong — what are you so frightened about?’

‘I—I don’t know, papa,’ I said, which was true. ‘It seems so strange.’

But this was not the whole truth. I *had* a queer, vague misgiving that the mystery had to do with the Whytes and their family affairs, though my mind was not collected enough to go into it properly.

‘You will understand it directly,’ said papa. ‘Ridiculous’—he gave a strange little laugh—‘as if my Connie—so open, too’——

But somehow this did not reassure me.

When we got to Lady Honor’s we were shown into the library. There was no one there, but in a moment or two old Mr Bickersteth hobbled in. He nodded to papa; afterwards I found that he and papa had met already that afternoon. Papa had looked in to speak to Lady

Honor about some poor protégé of hers, and she had taken the opportunity of telling him of the Whytes' troubles. Old Mr Bickersteth spoke kindly to me—even more kindly than usual—almost as though he were a little sorry for me. I fancy I did look rather white and startled.

‘Connie is a little frightened,’ said papa. ‘I told you I should say nothing to her, so that Lady Honor or Captain Whyte can question her themselves straight away. I should like to lose no time, if you please, Mr Bickersteth; I am extremely busy.’

‘Of course, of course; very sorry to detain you,’ said the old gentleman. ‘Just a little mistake, no doubt. You have taken it up too seriously, my dear Percy.’

But papa shook his head, though he smiled a little too.

‘Shall we go to the drawing-room?’

he said ; on which Mr Bickersteth opened the door and led the way, talking, as we crossed the hall, in a cheery, ordinary manner—no doubt to make it seem as if nothing were the matter.

A servant was standing close by. He threw open the drawing-room door, and papa, half-slipping his arm through mine, led me in. There were several people in the room, and I shook hands all round, though scarcely knowing with whom. Then by degrees I disentangled them ; there were not so many after all, and all well known to me. Captain and Mrs Whyte and Mary—not—Yvonne, Lady Honor of course, and Anna Gale and her father. Anna was very pale, and I could see she had been crying. Mary came up close to me and stood beside me. I think she took hold of my hand.

‘Now, Connie,’ said my father, ‘I want to ask you something. It has been stated

—it is believed by some of our friends here, but of course the moment you deny it it will be all right—that some little time ago you met in the lane that leads to the Yew Trees an old lady, a stranger, who asked you the way; and that you, instead of replying courteously and civilly as one should *always* do to a stranger, above all to an *old* person, answered her rudely, and went on to speak to her with something very like absolute insult; that you called her an old beggar, a tramp—I know not what.' Here Anna Gale began sobbing audibly. Papa took no notice, but went on coolly. 'Furthermore, that you bound down your companion not to tell of this, and that though it was at least a rather curious incident—strangers are not so common at Elmwood as all that—you have all these weeks concealed it and kept silent about it from *some* motive. Your companion supposes you knew you had done wrong,



'Yes, papa,' I said, 'it is all quite true.'

and that your conscience made you silent. Now, I shall be pleased if you will look up and say that the accusation is entirely unfounded; either that it is some strange mistake—or—or—no, *I* can't accuse other people's daughters of anything worse than making a mistake.'

He glanced round the room, a proud, half-defiant smile on his face. I seemed obliged by some fascination to keep my eyes on him till his gaze fell on me. And I think I was very pale, but while he spoke I don't think my expression had changed or faltered. *Now*, however, when he looked at me again, I felt as if his eyes were stabbing me; still I looked up.

'Yes, papa,' I said, 'it is all quite true. I spoke even worse than that. I made Anna promise not to tell, and I have never told myself, because I knew I had behaved disgracefully. But—but—I thought she was some kind of a tramp

—there are plenty of tramps about here.’ I stopped for a second. ‘No,’ I went on—something seemed *pushing* at me to tell the whole truth—‘no, I didn’t think she was a tramp when she came close. I thought she was from the almshouses. But she called me “child,” and—and I was cross already, and I didn’t think she was a lady, and—yes, I said it all, worse than you know even. And I didn’t want any one ever to know.’

Papa stood looking at me, but he did not speak. He seemed turned to stone. I could not bear it.

‘Oh papa!’ I cried, stretching out my hands to him, ‘don’t—don’t look’——

But he did not move. Only, two arms were thrown round me and clasped me tight. It was Mary.

‘You should forgive her,’ she called out in a voice that was almost fierce. ‘You *should*—everybody. She has told it all now bravely, and she didn’t

mean it. She didn't know it was our aunt.'

'Your aunt!' I gasped.

'Yes,' said Captain Whyte, coming forward and speaking very gently. 'My aunt, Connie. You did not know it, but I fear you have injured us irreparably, my poor child. She took you for Mary; she was coming to see us—as a surprise on Evey's birthday—and now nothing will make her believe it was *not* Mary. You allowed her to think so.'

'Yes, I suppose I did. I couldn't explain,' I replied; 'but she would believe—she *must*—if you told her.'

He shook his head.

'You cannot understand,' he said quietly.

I don't clearly remember what happened after this. I think Lady Honor spoke to me, not unkindly, but with a very troubled look. I remember Anna going on sobbing till I turned to her.

'What are you crying for?' I said. 'Nobody is vexed with you.'

'I should have told sooner,' she wept.

'Yes, I suppose you should. But it was my fault, not yours. Why can't you be satisfied that it's I—only I—to blame? Everybody thinks me as bad as I can be, but *you* needn't go on. Did your father ever look at you as papa did at me?'

I was growing desperate. Papa had walked out of the room without speaking to me. I did not know any one heard what I said to Anna till I felt some one's arm passed round me. It was Mrs Whyte. Her pretty, merry face was quite changed, the bright, gipsy look quite gone, but the kind, true brown eyes—Evey's eyes—were kind and true still.

'Don't speak like that, Connie dear,' she said. 'I am far more sorry for you than for ourselves. I will come and

see you to-morrow. I wish I could go home with you now, but poor Addie is so ill;' and I saw the tears glistening.

Then I found myself in the hall, and in another moment in the carriage again—alone! I heard Captain Whyte speak to the coachman.

'Take Miss Percy home, and then drive back to Todholes as fast as you can,' he said. 'Dr Percy will be there.'

I would have liked to say I could walk, and that the carriage might go after papa at once, but I was too stupefied. I think if all the village children had turned out and hooted after me as I drove along I should not have been surprised. I had only one thought—however wicked and horrid other people thought me, *mamma* would still love me. But for all that I hardly felt as if I could have kept my senses.

Perhaps I had better explain here how

it had all happened, and why—naughty as I had been—what was after all in itself but a trifling matter was considered so very seriously.

The old lady I had insulted was Mrs Fetherston, Captain Whyte's own aunt. She had been many years a childless widow, was very rich and very peculiar. She was rich partly through her husband, partly because the Whytes' family place was hers, left her by her father, for the property was not entailed. She had another nephew, Major Hugo Whyte, who as well as Captain Whyte had been partly brought up by her. But Captain Whyte had always been her favourite, and though he himself was younger than Major Whyte, his father had been older than Hugo Whyte's father, so Mrs Fetherston made him her heir. There was no jealousy between the two cousins; they loved each other dearly. Major Whyte went into the army while Captain

Whyte was still at school, and he was out in India when a quarrel occurred between the old lady and her favourite nephew. She wanted him to give up his profession, the navy, and live at home with her, doing nothing; she also, I *think*, wanted him to marry some girl he did not care for. He would not consent to either, and he would marry Mrs Whyte! So Mrs Fetherston disinherited him and put his cousin in his place. At first he did not much care; he was very happy in his own home, and his aunt still continued his allowance. It was not a very large one, and as time went on and so many children came it began to seem a very small one. At last he was forced to retire on half-pay. He had a little money of his very own, and Mrs Whyte had a little, and Major Whyte helped them as much as he could, though he was not, at present, rich himself. He also was always trying to soften

his aunt to them; she had no real cause for disliking Mrs Whyte, who was very well-born indeed, only not rich. It was in consequence of one of Hugo Whyte's letters that the queer old lady at last determined to see her nephew's family for herself, and to pay them a surprise visit. Then—you know what happened.

Soon after Yvonne's unfortunate birthday, Major Whyte, who had not been well for long—he was a delicate man, and had had much active service—got worse, and in consequence of this, as you may remember my overhearing at Lady Honor's party, he came home. He had seen by his aunt's letters that she was more bitter than ever against 'Frank' and his family, but he did not know why till he saw her and she told him the whole. He was dreadfully sorry; he did not think himself likely to live long, and his one wish was to see his cousin reinstated. For Mrs Fetherston was quite

capable, if he died, of leaving everything, even the Whytes' own old place, to some charity, away from Captain Whyte altogether. Hugo Whyte wrote to his cousin explaining what had happened, never doubting, of course, but that the rude little girl was Mary! Poor Mary at once denied it, and it became evident there was some strange mistake. Captain Whyte went off to consult Lady Honor, whose quick wits set to work to disentangle the riddle.

'There were two little girls,' she said. And that very day she saw Mr Gale and had a long talk with him. Mr Gale, in turn, had a long talk with Anna. Anna, it must be remembered, had only promised 'not to tell' of our adventure conditionally; and she had often felt uneasy about it. In one sense it was a relief to her to *have* to tell; but she got more than her share of punishment, poor girl! I shall always think. Lady Honor

was unwilling to tell papa about it. She knew how sensitive he was, and how he would take it to heart. So a letter was sent to Major Whyte, explaining the mistake, and asking him to allow Captain Whyte to take his two girls to see Mrs Fetherston. But the old lady had got an obstinate fit. She would not believe that the culprit was not Mary.

Then at last Lady Honor told papa. He took it up very seriously, just as she had feared—*too* seriously in one sense, though I well deserved all the blame I got.

And another long letter was despatched to poor Major Whyte, who, ill as he was, was determinedly trying to put things right.

The answer to this letter did not come for some days. But I have forgotten one part of the sad business. Not only was no birthday present or Christmas present sent to Yvonne by her godmother, but

for the first time no cheque was received by Captain Whyte's bankers from Mrs Fetherston. Her rancour had gone the length of stopping his allowance! No wonder the poor Yew Trees people were anxious. And this was *my* doing.



CHAPTER XI.

NOTHING VENTURE, NOTHING WIN.

THE short winter day was already closing in when the carriage stopped at our own door. I was crouched up in one corner, *perfectly* miserable. The fur rug was in a heap at my feet; when I glanced at it, and thought of how papa had tucked it round me that very afternoon, I felt as if I *could* not bear it. As I got out and entered the hall, where the light was dim, I saw some one standing at the drawing-room door. It was mamma waiting for me; she had heard the carriage stopping.

‘Connie, is that you?’ she said. ‘Is papa there?’

‘No, mamma,’ I managed to get out. ‘I’m alone.’

Then she drew me into the drawing-room—it looked so warm and bright, the red firelight dancing on the old furniture—and I was so shivering and cold! Somehow the look of it all—the look, above all, in mamma's eyes—was too much for me.

‘Mamma, mamma,’ I sobbed, and, once I had begun, my tears came like a thunderstorm, ‘do you know? Do you know about how naughty I’ve been?’

She had not really known, of course; till I owned to it no one could have really known, except Anna. But mamma had guessed it was true—in some ways she knew me and my faults and follies even better than papa did, gentle as she was. She had been afraid it was true when he told her that afternoon what I had been accused of, and he had been rather vexed with her!

‘Yes, darling,’ she said, ‘I know about it—mostly at least.’

226 Nothing Venture, Nothing Win.

She drew my head on to her knee, as I crept close to her where she sat on a low couch, and let me sob out all my misery. Oh mamma, dear little, sweet, unselfish mother, was there—*could* there ever be—any one so kind as you? And I, who had sometimes almost dared to look down on her for her very goodness! That afternoon brought me the end of the lesson I had begun to learn. It was quite dark, and growing late, before mamma rang for lights. I had cried my eyes into a dreadful state, and I was still shivering every now and then from a sort of nervousness. Mamma took me upstairs and made me go to bed.

‘You will feel better in the morning,’ she said. ‘And I will talk more to you. We must not *exaggerate* things, you know, dear. Good-night, my Connie, my own little Sweet Content.’

Was it not nice of her to call me that?

I did not go to sleep for a good while. When I did I slept heavily. It was quite daylight when I woke. Mamma was standing beside me, and Prudence was setting down a tray with my breakfast.

‘I will come back when you have finished, dear,’ mamma said. She did not mention papa, and when I asked Prue she only said he was already out.

So he was. Not only out, but away. When mamma came up again she told me that he had got a letter the night before which had decided him on going to London for two or three days—I think it was to attend some scientific meeting.

‘He came up to look at you last night,’ mamma went on, ‘but you did not wake.’

I did not speak for a minute or two. Then I said timidly:

‘Mamma, do you think he will ever forgive me? Mamma, do you know that he could scarcely have seemed more *terribly* angry if—if—I had done it on

228 Nothing Venture, Nothing Win.

purpose to hurt the Whytes, and you *know* it wasn't that. I love them too much; and even if I didn't, I *couldn't* be as bad as that.'

'I know, dear,' said mamma. 'But papa has very strong feelings about courtesy to strangers; above all to the old and poor—and that strange old Mrs Fetherston *seemed* poor. And then, too, the consequences are so *very* serious to the Whytes. Papa said to me he was afraid of judging your fault too much by the consequences; that was partly why he sent you home alone, and he is not sorry to be away for a day or two to think things over. I may tell you, Connie,' she went on, 'that bright and sweet-tempered, almost *perfect* as he seems to us, papa has naturally a very hot and violent temper. You have never seen it, he has learnt to control it so perfectly; but yesterday he was afraid of saying *too* much to you. That was partly why he went away.'

‘I understand,’ I said; ‘though, after all, I think I deserved everything any one could have said. Mamma,’ I added, ‘perhaps it’s from papa I get *my* temper; it’s certainly not from you. And people generally think I’m good-tempered, just as they do him. But he *is* good-tempered, because he has mastered himself, and I’m only not often bad-tempered because I generally manage to get my own way, and am very seldom crossed.’

Mamma smiled. She was glad to see me really thinking seriously.

‘Mamma,’ I said, ‘even if that—that horrid old woman does leave everything to the other one—to Major Whyte’—mamma had explained it all to me the evening before—‘it couldn’t matter so very much, would it? For he’s so fond of them all—could he not make it up to them?’

‘They fear he would be bound down by her will to do nothing for his cousins,’

230 Nothing Venture, Nothing Win.

said mamma. 'The old lady, once she has taken a thing in her head, seems very vindictive. Besides, Captain Whyte is a proud man; he has always hoped his aunt would leave him something; it would be hard for him to take it as a gift, almost like a charity, from his cousin. And what can they do for the present? They had little enough before; but now they must be terribly poor. And the old lady may live many years. The worst of all would be if Major Whyte died before her, without her being reconciled to his cousins.'

This made it all clear enough to me—only too clear. I could think of nothing else. I got up and dressed, for I was not ill. I was only feeling very miserable and rather shaky with crying so. Mamma had very kindly sent to Miss Wade to tell her not to come, which was a comfort. I was very glad to see no one but mamma, even though I longed for papa.

I wanted so to consult him, and see if nothing could be done.

It was a very rainy day; it went on steadily till late in the afternoon. It was one of those days which seem as if the sun had not risen.

I could not settle to anything. I tried to work and read, but it was no use. Then I began a letter to Evey; I did so want to let them know how miserably sorry I was, but the words would not come, and I gave it up.

‘It would only seem a mockery,’ I said to myself; ‘I don’t suppose they want to be reminded of me at all;’ and I got up and stood drearily by the window watching the plash of the rain as it fell into the puddles of the gravel walk. Suddenly a feeble ray of light caught my eyes—where was it coming from? I looked up. Yes, there, over where the sun would soon be setting, was a little break in the clouds; some thin, cold,

232 Nothing Venture, Nothing Win.

watery yellow was peeping out, and even as I gazed it reddened and warmed a little.

And at that moment an idea struck me which, the more I reflected on it, the more my judgment approved of. I stood there some minutes thinking intently. Then I flew into the library, where mamma was, I knew, tidying some of papa's books that afternoon.

She had finished and was standing by the fire.

'Mamma dear,' I said, 'I have thought of something;' and I went on rapidly to tell her what had come into my mind. She listened eagerly, but her face flushed and she looked half-frightened.

'We must wait till papa comes home and see what he says,' she replied.

I clasped my hands in entreaty.

'No, mamma,' I said. 'I have a feeling that we mustn't wait. There *can't* be any

harm in it. It is my duty to apologise. I could write her a letter, but that would not be the same good. I will not go to her to say "I'm not Mary;" I will just say I am the little girl that was so rude to her.'

Mamma considered.

'But if she refuses to see us?' she said. 'I saw she was yielding.

'Oh, well, then—I don't know. But anyway I shall have *tried*. Do you know her address, mamma?'

'I know the square she lives in, and the name is not common. We can easily find the number in any address-book when we get there. But, Connie'—

I stopped any further misgivings by kissing her. And seeing me look so much happier, mamma had not the heart to say anything more against it.

I need not explain what it was I wanted to do more particularly, for I think any one who reads this will under-

stand. I will just go on to tell exactly what happened.

The next morning—it was a fine day: how glad I was of that!—saw mamma and me comfortably installed in a first-class railway-carriage, *en route* for London. We had no luggage, for we were only going up for the day—Elmwood is only two hours from Victoria. When we got there mamma hailed a four-wheeler—I would rather have had a hansom, but mamma is rather nervous about hansoms, and after all I was scarcely in the humour to care much—and told the man to drive first to one of the big shops she knew well. There she got an address-book and found out old Mrs Fetherston's number, and off we set again. We scarcely spoke—I was growing so nervous—not out of fear for myself, but lest possibly it should all fail!

At last the cab drew up in front of a large, regular London house. We

got out. The door was opened by a footman, and farther back in the hall were one or two other men-servants. It was a stately, rather old-fashioned house. How strange to think that it belonged to the queer old woman I had so mistaken!

‘Is Mrs Fetherston at home?’ mamma inquired. It was now about half-past two; we had chosen the time well. The footman hesitated.

‘I think my mistress is at home,’ he said, ‘but she don’t see many visitors.’ Mamma smiled so sweetly that he could not help adding, ‘I can inquire if’——

‘Perhaps you had better take my card to her, as it is really on business. And pray say I will not detain her many minutes.’

At the word ‘business’ the man hesitated again; but he saw that we had kept the cab; that did not look much like

lady-like impostors. 'Will you step in?' he began again.

In her turn mamma hesitated.

'We could wait in the cab,' she said to me doubtfully. But it was a very cold day.

At that moment a tall, thin, dark-complexioned man—gentleman, I mean—crossed the hall.

'Shut the door, David,' he said hastily. But then, seeing us there, he came forward a little way, courteously. 'I beg your pardon, won't you come in?'

We did so, sufficiently at least for David to shut the door; then the man turned to the gentleman to explain the state of the case.

'Do come in,' the gentleman repeated, throwing open the door of a library, which looked warm and comfortable. 'I am half-afraid Mrs Fetherston'—

Mamma and I glanced at each other.

She was going to speak, I think, but I forestalled her.

‘Major Whyte,’ I said, ‘please may we tell you about it? Mamma—mamma is Mrs Percy,’ I added.

He was very quick-witted. He seemed to know in an instant. Indeed, though we did not hear that till afterwards, he had that morning got a letter from his cousin explaining the mystery of ‘Mary’s’ strange behaviour! And in another moment we were in the library with him, the door closed, and David told to wait till he was rung for, while mamma told our story. Major Whyte listened most attentively while mamma, clearly and without hesitation—except just once, and that was at the part about my naughty rudeness, when she stopped and glanced at me: ‘I need not say how deeply Constantia has grieved over this,’ she said—related everything. The only sound besides her voice was Major

238 Nothing Venture, Nothing Win.

Whyte's cough, the sort of cough one cannot bear to hear. And when she stopped, for a minute or two he could not speak for coughing; his thin, brown face grew so painfully red, and he seemed to shake all over. How sorry I felt for him!

Mamma waited quietly. Then, glancing round, she caught sight of a carafe of water and a glass on the side-table. She poured some out and brought it to him.

'Thank you—so much,' he said, and in a little he was able to speak again.

'I see it all, of course,' he said. 'It is brave of your daughter to have come herself, Mrs Percy, and it seems to me it was the best thing to do. There is certainly a very strong likeness between her and Mary, though I have not seen Mary for four years.—If I had been told you were Mary,' he went on, turning to me with a smile, 'I think I should have

believed it. Now, have you the courage to beard the—to come with me to Mrs Fetherston alone? I think, perhaps, that is the best chance.'

Mamma and I looked at each other, and Major Whyte looked at us both.

'Yes,' I said, 'I'll come alone, if it's best.'

'Bravo!' said our new friend—I felt he was a friend at once—and he held out his hand to me in a way I could not resist or resent, though generally I stood on my dignity a good deal. 'We had been thinking of trying a rather desperate experiment to bring my poor aunt to her senses,' he said. 'But I believe your effort will be more successful.'

We left the room together, he and I. I followed him upstairs to the first floor, and through two big drawing-rooms into a third and smaller one at the back. In he stalked, coughing a little now and then; in I crept after him. A big fire was

blazing, an arm-chair was drawn close to it, and on, or rather in, the arm-chair, which almost seemed to swallow her up, was seated a small, dark figure. She was reading the newspaper.

‘What is it, Hugo?’ she said, at the sound of my conductor’s footsteps. ‘There you are again, in and out as usual, exposing yourself to every draught, of course.’

The sharp tones, the queer, black, unnatural-looking curls were all too familiar to me. I could not help shivering a little.

‘Aunt Angela,’ he said—only fancy *that* being her name!—‘I have brought a young lady to see you;’ and he drew me forward a little. ‘You have seen her before’—piercing eyes were upon me by this time—‘but perhaps I can best introduce her and best explain her visit by telling you she is *not* your great-niece, Mary Whyte.’

He stood still to watch the effect of his audacity. The old lady began to tremble a little, though she tried to hide it. But this gave me courage, because it made me sorry for her.

‘Who—who are you, then? Who do you say you are?’ she said, in a shaky, quavering voice.

I came towards her and stood full in the light, such a light as there is on a winter day in a London back drawing-room. I pushed my hat back—it fell off, and my fair hair came tumbling over my face. Major Whyte picked up my hat. I shook back my hair. The old lady could see me quite plainly.

‘You will remember my face, I think?’ I said gently. ‘My name is Connie—Constantia Percy—papa is Dr Percy. He is the doctor at Elmwood; everybody there knows us. I have come to—to apologise to you *very* much for being so rude to you that day. I was in a bad

temper before I met you. I don't think I'd have been so rude—and—and unkind—to a stranger if it hadn't been for that. I do hope you will forgive me.'

She looked at me still for some seconds without speaking. Then she turned to her nephew.

'I can see now that there is no real likeness to Frank,' she said coolly. 'Still, the mistake was a very natural one, meeting her where I did, with the superficial resemblance of colouring, and so on, to what you had told me of the second girl, and to her photograph.'

'Yes,' said Major Whyte, his face flushing nervously, 'the original *mistake* was natural enough, Aunt Angela—that is to say, if you could imagine, which I *couldn't*, that one of Frank's girls could have behaved so; but after you were assured that it *was* a mistake, when they absolutely denied it'— He stopped; his indignation had carried him further than



'I do hope you will forgive me.'

was prudent. He had hit Mrs Fetherston hard; he had hit some one else hard too. Indeed, I think he had forgotten I was there. But I was too much in earnest to resent the unflattering inference of his words.

‘You could not think me like Mary if you saw us together,’ I said eagerly. ‘She is ever, *ever* so much prettier, and *of course* just as good as I am naughty. It is quite true, neither she nor Yvonne could have behaved as I did.’

My voice began to break as I said the last words; the long strain was beginning to tell on me. I felt the tears coming, and I tried to choke them down. I knew Mrs Fetherston’s keen eyes were on me.

‘My dear,’ she said—I could scarcely have believed her voice could have been so different—‘there are worse little girls in the world than you. I freely forgive you what I have to forgive. Some day I *may* see you and Mary together.’

Major Whyte started and a bright look of pleasure lighted up his face.

‘Aunt Angela’—— he began joyfully. Then I think the remembrance of what he had said came over him suddenly, for he turned to me.

‘My dear child,’ he said, ‘you must forgive me. I forgot.’

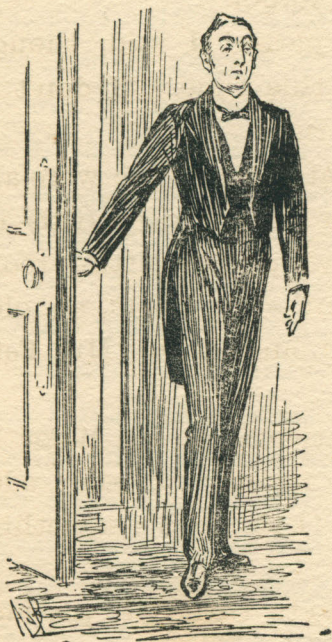
‘No, no, please,’ I said, though I was crying by this time. ‘I don’t mind; it was quite true.’

But at that moment we were all startled by a knock at the door (this room was the old lady’s private sitting-room), and a man-servant—not David, an older one—appeared in answer to Mrs Fetherston’s ‘Come in.’

‘A—a gentleman to see Major Whyte, if you please, ma’am,’ he said; adding in a lower tone, ‘I think it’s something rather particular.’

Major Whyte turned to go, but a fit of coughing interrupted him.

‘My poor boy, you are killing yourself,’ said his aunt. — ‘Freeland, bring the gentleman up here if it is anything particular. Your master can’t go running up and down stairs in this way.’



CHAPTER XII

TRUE HEARTS.

WE all waited without speaking. Poor Major Whyte, indeed, seemed exhausted by his cough. There was a feeling in the air, I think, as if something strange were going to happen.

And in a very few moments there came the sound of footsteps up the stairs and then crossing the two big drawing-rooms. And then—the door opened. Freeland murmured something, and I saw coming through the doorway the familiar figure of Captain Whyte, and close behind him the sweet, fair face of dear Mary.

Major Whyte started up. He wrung his cousin's hand without speaking. But I—what do you think I did? I seized

Mary and dragged her forward. Fancy, *me*, naughty me, being the one to introduce Mary to her own aunt!

‘Here she is,’ I cried; ‘now you *can* see us together. This is Mary, your own niece, Mrs Fetherston; you can see if what I said wasn’t true.’

Mary *did* look sweet, though she was shabbily dressed and very frightened. In that grand house the old tweed jacket looked even shabbier than at Elmwood. She clung to me till I almost pushed her into the old lady’s arms.

‘Kiss her, Mary. She’s your own aunt. Oh, *do!*’ I whispered; ‘you don’t know what good it might do. Oh, do kiss her!’

Perhaps the last three words were spoken more loudly in my excitement; perhaps the old lady’s ears were as sharp as her eyes! However it was, she heard, and she smiled.

‘Yes, *do,*’ she repeated, and she half-held

out her arms to Mary. 'You are not my special child, I suppose,' she said. 'Yvonne is my godchild; but, oh, you are very like what Frank was!—Frank,' she added tremulously—'my boy, Frank—are you not going to speak to me too?'

He came to her at once. I turned away, and somehow or other I found myself with Major Whyte in the outer room.

'Do you—do you really think it is going to be all right?' I could not help saying to him.

He nodded; for a moment or two it seemed as if he could not speak, and I think there were tears in his eyes. His voice was husky when he did speak, but that might have been from his cough.

'Yes,' he said, 'I do—I do really hope so. *Thank God!*'

And as I glanced up at his kind, worn face there seemed to me to be a light

about it—a light such as one never sees save in the face of those who have suffered much and have learnt to thank God for both sorrow and joy. I knew then that poor Major Whyte was not—as our simple country-folk say—was not ‘long for this world.’ I never saw him again, and I had never seen him before, but I have never forgotten him.

He took me downstairs to where mamma was anxiously waiting. He had ordered tea for her and me; he knew we should be the better for it, he said, before setting off on our cold journey back. He was so gentle and considerate to mamma, telling her all that had happened upstairs as frankly as if she had been an old friend—I always notice that people who are quite, *quite* well-bred are so much franker than commoner people, who make mysteries about nothing, and treat you as if your one object in life was to get their secrets

out of them—and he was quite right, for she did indeed feel like one. And when we went away he took both my hands in his *so* nicely and thanked *me*—me, the naughty, horrid little mischief-maker. Was it not more than good of him? When we were by ourselves in the cab I leant my head against mamma's shoulder and burst into tears. I could not help it.

'All's well that ends well, my Connie—my little Sweet Content,' she said. But I could not help going on crying when I thought of poor Major Hugo's thin face and his terrible cough, and of how much *I* had added to his troubles and anxieties by my naughtiness on Evey's birthday.

Papa came home the next day. We were longing to see him and to tell him everything. I fancy mamma was just a little afraid of his thinking we had been imprudent, though she did not say so to

me for fear of making me anxious. I *was* anxious all the same. We had heard nothing of the Whytes, and mamma thought it better not to go to see them or send to the Yew Trees till papa came home. We did not know what time to expect him; his letter only said 'to-morrow, as early in the afternoon as I can manage it.' I spent that afternoon principally at the dining-room window, watching for him, which was very silly, I know, and certainly did not make the time pass quicker. But I really *could* not settle down to anything. Just fancy: I had not seen papa since he turned away from me in silent, cold contempt in Lady Honor's drawing-room, though it was a comfort to know that he had come up to my room that same night and looked at me as I lay asleep.

When at last he *did* come, I was, of course, not at my post; that is always the way. I was in the drawing-room at

afternoon tea with mamma. I did not even hear his latchkey in the lock, as I often did. He was standing at the drawing-room door, looking at us, before we knew he was there!

All my plans of what I would say, how I would ask him to forgive me, flew out of my head. I just rushed up to him and threw my arms round him and burst into tears.

‘Oh papa, papa!’ I said.

He did not repulse me; he did not speak for a moment, but I felt his kind, firm clasp. Then he said:

‘My poor little girl!’ and he stooped and kissed me. The kiss said everything.

Mamma came forward.

‘Tom dear,’ she began, a little nervously, ‘we have a great deal to tell you.’

Poor little mamma—what a shame it was that she should be nervous, when if she *had* done anything imprudent it had only been for my sake!

But papa's first words took away all our fears.

'No, darling,' he said. I liked to hear him call mamma 'darling;' he did not often do so, for he is not at all what is called 'demonstrative.' 'No, you haven't; I know all you have to tell me, and a good deal more. Indeed, I rather think I have a good deal to tell *you*. But, first, give me a cup of nice hot tea. It *is* cold this afternoon;' and, still with his arm thrown round my neck, he came close up to the fireplace and stood there, watching mamma as she poured out his tea in the nice, neat way she does everything.

'This is comfortable,' said papa; 'it's worth having a cold journey to come home like this, especially when—when one has good news, too, to bring back.'

I started at this.

'Oh papa,' I said, 'is it about the Whytes?—Is it all right?'

'I think so. I quite believe so,' he replied. 'I had a most cheerful note from Captain Whyte this morning, written from his aunt's house. We were together in London yesterday. He came to my hotel with Mary, on his way to Mrs Fetherston's, little thinking of your stealing a march on us! Indeed, it was a good deal my idea—the taking Mary to show that she was herself, and not'—

'Not *me*,' I interrupted. 'Oh papa, I have been *so* sorry, *so* ashamed!'

'I know you have,' said papa gravely. 'I would have spared it you if I could; but yet, Connie'—

'I deserved it,' I said, 'and I wouldn't have minded its being twice as bad as it was yesterday if it was to put things right. And the old lady was really kind, papa, at the end.'

'Captain Whyte told me all,' he said. 'I don't think any of them dared to hope

in the least that things would turn out so well. They are all going up to town to-morrow—all, that is to say, except the three little fellows. Mrs Fetherston is not one to do things by halves, I fancy. The saddest part of the whole is poor Hugo Whyte's precarious state.'

'Have you seen him?' mamma asked.

'Yes,' papa replied. 'I called on him the day I went up to speak about Captain Whyte's idea of bringing Mary. He is very, very ill. I don't think they quite realise how ill he is. Perhaps, however, it is just as well. He may have a little breathing-time now he is happier and cheered by having them all about him; he may live a few months in comparative comfort. That is the best I can hope for.'

'It is a comfort to think that his last days will be cheered and happy,' said mamma softly.

But I could not help crying again just

a little, at night when I was alone, when I thought of Major Whyte's face, and that I could never hope to see him well and strong and bright like papa and Captain Whyte.

Things turned out pretty much as papa had predicted. Two days after the evening I have been telling you about—the evening of papa's return—all the Yew Trees people came home again. We knew they had come home by hearing accidentally that the fly from the 'Stag's Head' had been ordered to meet them at the station at three o'clock. So I posted myself at the dining-room window, and had the tantalising gratification of seeing both it and Lady Honor's brougham pass our door on their way to the Yew Trees. I could distinguish Mrs Whyte in the brougham, and a bag or two, and the back of a hat which I was sure was Yvonne's. And the fly was well filled too. But none of them looked out our way, or nodded to me,

though they *might* have seen me. I felt rather unhappy again.

‘Mamma,’ I said when I got back to the drawing-room, ‘I have seen them all pass, but they didn’t look this way. Mamma, you and papa have forgiven me, but perhaps—even if they *forgive* me, they’re perhaps not going to be the same ever again;’ and I could scarcely choke down a sob.

‘Connie dearest,’ said mamma, ‘how can you fancy such things? You will see, dear, it will be all right.’

But I was very unhappy all that evening.

‘They have *never* passed before without looking out,’ I kept saying to myself, and mamma could not manage to cheer me. But just as I was going to bed the ‘odd man’ from the Yew Trees made his appearance with a note for ‘Miss Percy’ from Evey! I knew the handwriting, and tore it open.

‘DEAREST CONNIE,’ it said, ‘we *were* so disappointed not to find you here, at the Yew Trees, when we arrived. I wrote yesterday from London to ask you to be here to spend the evening, so that we could tell you everything. I gave the note to Lancey, and he has just found it in his pocket! So please ask dear Mrs Percy to let you come to-morrow. You must have a whole holiday for once, and stay all day. Oh, we are so happy!—Your loving

EVEY.’

‘*Now*, Connie,’ said mamma triumphantly, ‘surely you will never mistrust your friends again.’

I thought I never could, and I thought so still more when I came home the next evening, after one of the very happiest days I ever spent. But I have not *quite* kept to it, as I will tell before I come to the end of my story.

I must go straight on. Was it not sweet

of them to make me so happy? They would not let me keep the least sore feeling about what I had done; they would have it I had been so 'brave and unselfish'—fancy *me* unselfish!—in going to see Mrs Fetherston on my own account, as I had done. Everything was coming right. Mrs Fetherston had fallen in love with their mother, and what wonder! They were all to spend the next summer holidays at Southerwold—that was the old home of the Whytes, which none of the Yew Trees children had ever seen. 'Uncle Hugo,' as they called him, was to get quite well immediately; and though I felt more inclined to cry than to smile when they said this, knowing what papa thought about Major Whyte, I took care not to cloud their bright hopes. It was so like the Whytes! They could not see anything other than hopefully. Some people think that a bad way to face life and its

troubles, but I really can't say. All I know is that when troubles do come those dear friends of ours meet them bravely.

'Isn't Uncle Hugo a darling?' said Yvonne. 'Of course we've known *him* all our lives, though we never saw Aunt Fetherston before. But it's nearly five years since Uncle Hugo went to India, so of course we had all to learn each other over again, as he says. He's taken such a fancy to you, Connie! He's coming down here to stay with us as soon as ever the milder weather really sets in; just now he's best in London. There's no pleasure in being in the country if one can't go out.'

'No, of course not,' I agreed. Evey's confident tone almost made me feel as if, perhaps, papa was wrong, and that Major Whyte *would* get well again after all.

But, alas! it was not so. He did seem

to get better for a little, and even papa, who was up in London again a month or so later, and went to see him, allowed when he came home that he could not have believed Major Whyte could have rallied so much. And as the spring set in early, and the good symptoms continued, all was arranged for his coming down to the Yew Trees; the very day and train were fixed, and we three were nearly as pleased at the idea of seeing him again as the Whytes themselves, when the blow fell. Something—no one could say certainly what; it might have been a slight chill, or overfatigue, or perhaps merely the pleasant excitement of the visit in prospect—something—he was so far gone that a mere nothing was enough, papa said—brought on his cough again fearfully. He broke a blood-vessel, I think, and there was only time to telegraph for Captain and Mrs Whyte and the elder children to go to bid him

good-bye before he passed away, very peacefully and very happily, Evey and Mary told me, when they were able to tell me about it. For it was a real and sad grief to them all, and it was the first trouble of *that* kind they had ever known.

‘He sent his love and good-bye to you,’ Yvonne said; “little Connie Percy” he called you. And I heard him say, “But for her, things might not have been as they are.” Yes, he was quite happy. Do you know,’ she went on in a very low voice, ‘years and years ago Uncle Hugo was going to be married to somebody very nice and sweet, and she died. Mother told us. I think it was that that made him so gentle and kind, though he was very brave too.’

The children gave no thought to the difference Major Whyte’s death would make to them all in the end. I think Captain Whyte told papa all, but I never

heard or thought about it till the change actually came. That was two years after Major Whyte's death, when poor old Mrs Fetherston died too. She felt the shock of his death very much; for, though he had not been originally her favourite nephew, no one could have lived with him without learning to love him. She had grown dependent on him, too, for helping her to manage things. Altogether, it was a great blow; though now, fortunately, as things were, she had Captain Whyte instead, and for the rest of her life she did indeed cling to him and his wife, and to them all. But she never came down to Elmwood again. She stayed on at Southerwold, where she went immediately after Major Whyte's death, and one or the other, or more, of the Yew Trees family were always with her. So I never saw her again, though now and then there was a talk of her coming to the Yew Trees.

These two years were very happy. The Whytes, though they still lived very simply, were free from anxiety about the future, and instead of this making them selfish, it only made them the kinder. All children, I suppose, live a good deal in the present. I don't think I understood this till the great change came, which made such a difference to me. I had thought, I suppose, that things would always go on much the same.

But one day—it was only six months ago—Captain and Mrs Whyte, who had both been at Southerwold for nearly a week, telegraphed to papa that old Mrs Fetherston had died. It was rather sudden at the last, and in the telegram they asked him to go to the Yew Trees and tell the children. I had seen them only the evening before, when there was no expectation of such a thing.

‘Give them my love, papa,’ I said as he

was starting, 'and tell them I am very sorry.'

'They *will* be sorry, I suppose,' I added to mamma when we were sitting alone; 'but not *very*, do you think? She was rather a frightening old lady, though I don't mean to be unkind.'

'She was very much softened of late,' said mamma; but she spoke rather absently.

'Still, mamma, it can't make them *very* miserable—not like if one of themselves had died,' I said. 'I may go to see them soon, mayn't I, and everything be the same?'

Mamma looked at me very tenderly.

'Connie dear,' she said, 'don't you understand that it must make a great difference? Captain Whyte will be the owner of Southerwold and one or two other smaller places as well, I believe. He will be a very, very rich man, and they will be very important people. I

don't say it will change their *hearts*—indeed, I am very, very sure it will not; but they will have many new ties, and responsibilities, and duties, and—they will have to leave us.'

I stared at her. It was very silly of me not to have thought of it before, but I just hadn't. Then I burst into tears and hid my face on mamma's shoulder.

'You must try not to be selfish, darling,' she whispered. 'Try to be my own Sweet Content, and trust.'

I did try—I have tried, and I dare say mamma thinks I have succeeded. But in my heart I know I have not *quite*. It all happened as mamma had said; as it *had* to, indeed. But it came so soon. I had not realised that. They were all as kind and dear as they could be to the end; only they were very busy, and, of course, a little excited by the change. What wonder? Who could have helped it? In

their place, I am sure, I should have been just *horridly* selfish. And before we knew where we were they were gone, the Yew Trees empty and shut up again. I went through it once—just once—but never again; for when I came to Evey and Mary's room, with the climbing roses paper on the walls, I felt as if my heart would burst. That was six months ago. I have seen none of them since. They write me nice letters, but lately I have not had one; and, after all, letters are only letters. Some of them have been abroad for part of the winter; poor Addie was ill again, and no doubt they have new friends, and lots and lots to do. Perhaps it will be wisest for me to remember this, and not expect ever hardly to see them again; but—there is mamma calling me—what can it be? I must run and see.

It was a letter from Yvonne—a letter

and an *invitation*. I am to go to Southerwold for the Easter holidays! Oh! I can hardly believe it. I don't know if I am glad or not. I am *so* afraid they will have grown so grand, and that I shall feel strange and shy. Oh, my dear Evey and Mary, if I could but have you again like last year, with your dear old shabby tweed jackets, and the loving hearts inside them!

SOUTHERWOLD, *April 16th*, 188-.

I am *here*, at Southerwold, and, oh, so happy! It is the most beautiful, the grandest place you can imagine. They have *everything*! But it is not the place nor the grandeur that makes me happy. It is themselves. They are just quite, *exactly* the same. I will never, never, never have horrid, distrustful fancies about them again. They met me at the station—Evey and Mary—in their own beautiful pony-carriage, and in one



They met me at the station—Evey and Mary—in their own beautiful pony-carriage.

moment I felt it was all right. And just fancy—they had on the old tweed jackets!

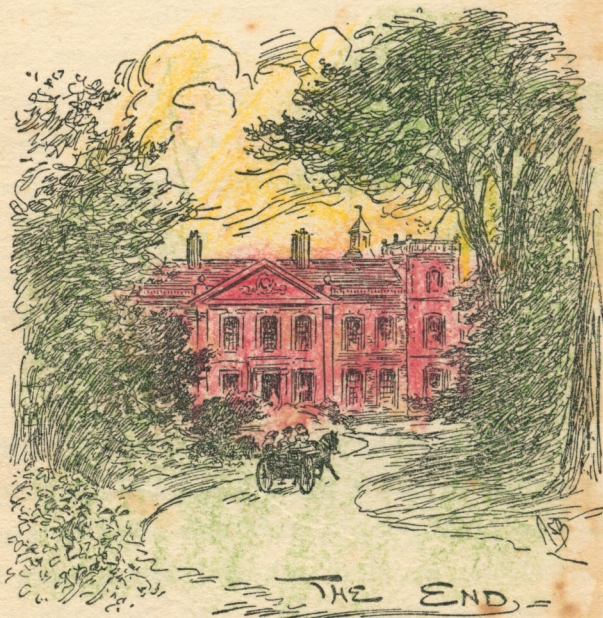
‘It has got so suddenly hot,’ said Yvonne, in her funny, practical way, ‘that we couldn’t stand our winter things; so we routed these out. They do very well, don’t they? I suppose we shall get new ones this year. There isn’t any difficulty now about such things, you see, Connie,’ she added, smiling.

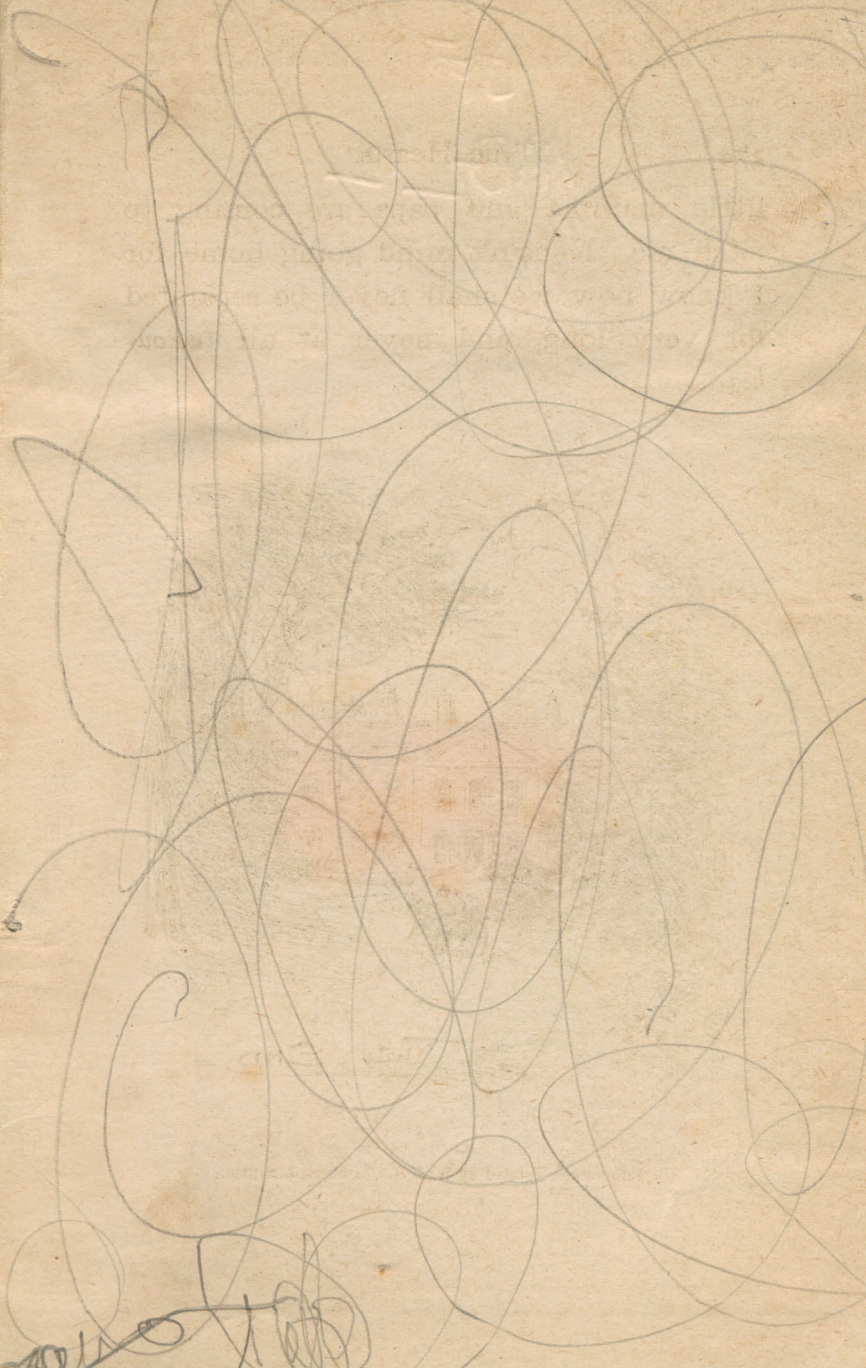
‘How pretty your jacket is, Connie!’ said Mary, admiringly.—‘Do let us ask mother to get us ones something like it, Evey.’

Dear Mary—they were all dear. They are going to show me all the things they do—the poor people, and the schools, and everything, so that when I come here I shall know their ways and be able to help them. For I am to come *very* often, they say. And the week after next, dear

True Hearts.

little mamma and papa are coming to fetch me. I sha'n't mind going home, for I know now we shall never be separated for very long, and never at all *in our hearts.*





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